

## United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## 1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Mitchell-Simmons House

Other name/site number: Anaqua

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

## 2. Location

Street &amp; number: 904 Commerce Street

City or town: Refugio State: Texas County: Refugio

Not for publication: ☐ N/A Vicinity: ☐ N/A

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  
☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:

☐ national ☐ statewide ☒ localApplicable National Register Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

State Historic Preservation Officer

12/20/23  
Date

Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

☐ entered in the National Register☐ determined eligible for the National Register☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.☐ removed from the National Register☐ other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

## 5. Classification

### Ownership of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Federal

### Category of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

### Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
2	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: N/A

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions:** DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling; Secondary Structure

**Current Functions:** DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling; Secondary Structure

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification:** LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS: Classical Revival

**Principal Exterior Materials:** Concrete, Wood

**Narrative Description** (see pages 7-11)

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

## 8. Statement of Significance

**Applicable National Register Criteria:** C

**Criteria Considerations:** N/A

**Areas of Significance:** Architecture (*local*)

**Period of Significance:** 1940

**Significant Dates:** 1940 (remodel)

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): N/A

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): N/A

**Architect/Builder:** Leffland, Jules (architect, 1902-1903); Dunbar, Irving (architect, 1940); Strauch, George (builder)

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see pages 12-23)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see pages 24-26)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data:**

- ☒ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other -- Specify Repository:

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): *Historic Resources Survey of Aransas, Refugio, and Calhoun Counties, Refugio County Survey Report, May 2023.*

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** Less than one acre (0.6379 acres)

### Coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

1. Latitude: 28.295702°N Longitude: -97.275973°W

**Verbal Boundary Description:** N/3 OF LT 3 & LT 12 BLK 25 (Parcel ID: 400301), Refugio, Refugio County, Texas. Refugio County Appraisal District data accessed January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (Map 3).

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary follows the legal parcel and contains the area historically associated with the Mitchell-Simmons House property. It excludes the smaller 0.2128 acre parcel to the south, listed under the same parcel ID (as sequence 2) and ownership in the Refugio County Appraisal District data.

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Emily Payne  
Organization: HHM & Associates, Inc.  
Street & number: P.O. Box 9648  
City or Town: Austin State: TX Zip Code: 78766  
Email: epayne@hhminc.com  
Telephone: 512/478-8014  
Date: April 2023

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see pages 27-30)

**Figures** (see pages 31-52)

**Photographs** (see pages 5, 53-65)

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## Photograph Log

Name of Property: Mitchell-Simmons House

City or Vicinity: Refugio

County: Refugio

State: Texas

Photographer: Erin Tyson (HHM) and Breeden Restoration and Preservation

Date: August 2022 and December 2023

*All photographs accurately depict property conditions. No changes nor significant deterioration has occurred since the photos were taken in August 2022 and December 2023.*

Photo 1. East front façade (left) and north side façade (right), camera facing southwest.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 2. North side façade, camera facing south.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 3. North side facade (left) and west side façade (right), camera facing southeast.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 4. West side facade, camera facing east.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 5. West rear facade (left) and south side façade (right), camera facing northeast.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 6. South side façade showing front porch, camera facing north.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 7. East front façade, camera facing west.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 8. East front façade, camera facing southwest.  
Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.

Photo 9. Interior, first floor, living room, camera facing west, doors to the sunroom shown at south (left) and stairs shown in northwest background (right).  
Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.

Photo 10. Interior, first floor, parlor in foreground and library/music room in background, camera facing west by southwest.  
Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.

Photo 11. Interior, first floor, stair hall, camera facing southwest.  
Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.

Photo 12. Garage, north front façade, camera facing south.  
Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.

Photo 13. Brick front walkway, camera facing west.  
Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.

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This project was funded in part through a grant from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as administered by the Texas Historical Commission. The contents and opinions, however, do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal funds from the National Park Service. Regulations of the U.S. Department of the Interior strictly prohibit unlawful discrimination in departmental Federally Assisted Programs on the basis of race, color, national origin, age or handicap. Any person who believes he or she has been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility operated by a recipient of Federal assistance should write to: Director, Equal Opportunity Program, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127.

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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## Narrative Description

*This project was funded through an Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund grant from the National Park Service that addresses damage inflicted by Hurricane Harvey. In January 2021 NPS staff concurred that property is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.*

The Mitchell-Simmons House (also known as “Anaqua”) occupies a prominent corner lot at 904 Commerce Street southwest of the courthouse square in Refugio, Refugio County, Texas. The lot was platted with the original settlement of Refugio by Irish immigrants around 1834, with the earliest house on the lot built around that same time. The heirs to the property demolished the original house around 1900 to make way for a new, grand Queen Anne residence. Known as the Mitchell House, this new house was designed by architect Jules Leffland and constructed between April 1902 and April 1903.<sup>1</sup> In 1940 the next heir commissioned a substantial remodel designed by architect Irving Dunbar that resulted in the Classical Revival style visible today.<sup>2</sup> The main character defining features include the original two-story wood-frame irregular form and wraparound porch, symmetrical façade, hipped with cross-gabled roof, and the full-height entry porch, with its triangular pediment supported by monumental Corinthian columns. A wood frame garage on the property also dates to the 1940 remodel. Repair work to address damage that resulted from Hurricane Harvey began in May 2023 with approval from the Texas Historical Commission and is being carried out in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. Overall, the property retains a high level of historic integrity.

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## Setting and Landscape

Flat coastal plains encompass the town of Refugio, located in southeastern Texas, about 12 miles from Copano Bay and about 40 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico. The climate is humid and subtropical. The Mission River runs along the town’s southwestern boundary and native vegetation includes live oak and mesquite trees, prickly pears, and huisache shrubs.<sup>3</sup> A grid pattern organizes the town’s street network, established as early as 1834 (as further discussed in Section 8). The courthouse square originally formed the core of the town, but over time subsequent growth extended northward, so that the courthouse and the adjacent Mitchell-Simmons House lie toward the southern edge of the town today. Other buildings adjoining the courthouse square include the public library, the sheriff’s office, and the Woodworth House, built by a cousin of the Mitchell-Simmons family in 1900. Today, the remnants of Refugio’s small commercial downtown extend northward from the square along Commerce Street, although historically the downtown also extended east and northeast of the courthouse between Commerce and Alamo Streets. Low-density single-family housing surrounds the Mitchell-Simmons property to the west, south, and east.

The Mitchell-Simmons property rests on the southwest corner of the intersection of Commerce Street and Empresario Street. The lot is roughly square, with the house near the middle. The façade of the Mitchell-Simmons House is oriented to the east. From at least 1903 until around 1940, the property also included a two-bay wood garage building abutting Empresario Street, as well as a one-story wood secondary dwelling with a narrow shotgun-like form located along the rear property line (Figure 7).<sup>4</sup> A picket fence with brick piers surrounded the property

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<sup>1</sup> *The Refugio Review* (newspaper), Apr. 11, 1902, from the *Portal to Texas History (Portal)* crediting the Dennis M. O’Connor Public Library (O’Connor Library), [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739189](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739189); *The Refugio Review*, Jun. 6, 1902, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739093](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739093); *The Refugio Review*, Apr. 10, 1903, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739110](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739110).

<sup>2</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks* (newspaper), Feb. 23, 1940, from the Portal crediting the O’Connor Library, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874558/m1/1>.

<sup>3</sup> John Leffler, “Refugio County,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed May 08, 2022, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/refugio-county](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/refugio-county).

<sup>4</sup> Contextual research (further detailed in Section 8) suggests that the secondary dwelling may have been extant as early as 1850, when non-family residents are first enumerated on the property in census records.

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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after it was originally constructed, as visible in a photo from around 1910 (Figure 3). The fence was disassembled during the 1940s remodel (Figure 6). The 1940s remodel also entailed demolition of the earlier outbuildings and construction of a detached garage with a concrete driveway, located toward the rear of the house to the southwest.<sup>5</sup> A concrete front walkway was added around 1940, as well as a secondary concrete walkway on the north side. A brick walkway from the main east entrance to Commerce Street was added in 1985 (Photo 13). In the early 1900s, landscaping was limited to a scrubby lawn and a few small trees. By the late twentieth century, the landscape included a more manicured lawn, as well as a brick-edged border of shrubs surrounding the perimeter (Figure 5). Today, the landscaped brick-lined border remains only in patches as well as some mature trees on the property. (Photos 1-2).

## Architectural Description

### The Mitchell House (1902-1903)

#### *Exterior*

The original construction of the Mitchell House established the overall form and massing that remain evident in the Mitchell-Simmons House today, reflecting the work of architect Jules Leffland.<sup>6</sup> As seen in historic photographs and maps, the Mitchell House was a wood-frame structure with a central two-story square mass with a high-pitched hipped roof and a flat central section allowing for a widow's walk (Figures 3, 6, 7). A series of two-and-a-half-story wings with gabled roofs protruded from the central mass, creating the hipped with lower cross gables form. Roof features included three tall brick chimneys and a series of finials and decorative metal ridge crestings. A two-story wraparound porch adjoined the front (east) and side (north and south) façades, featuring a curved profile at the southeastern corner and a projecting octagonal profile at the northeastern corner. An additional side porch covered the north-facing side entrance (Figure 7). Original exterior walls appear to have been constructed using Dutch lap wood siding, and the original roof was covered with cedar shakes. Exuberant milled wood ornamentation adorned the front façade and side elevations – including turned balusters and porch posts, a spindle frieze, jigsawn porch brackets, dentil molding along the roof bargeboards, and lacy ornamentation at the gable-end peaks. The original double-hung wood windows on the first and second floors were tall and narrow, with six panes in the top sash over six in the bottom sash. The original front entrance included a single wood door with a single glass pane in the upper half, flanked by sidelights and a tripartite transom. The lumber used came from the George Strauch Lumber Company, founded in Refugio around 1888.<sup>7</sup> The choice to use such extensive wood ornamentation stemmed from popular styles of the day but also likely resulted from a celebration of the newfound availability of lumber, locally, with Strauch's arrival. In 1902-1903, the town still had no railroad connections, and previously all lumber arrived via barge from Seadrift, Texas—nearly 50 miles away—and then travel overland on horse-drawn wagons over uneven dirt roads.

#### *Interior*

Little evidence survives to document the interior configuration of the original Mitchell House. The fenestration pattern suggests that the interior plan included a central hall with rooms opening to either side, similar to the floor plan today (Figures 8 and 9). The stairwell present today likely remains in the location of the original stair, toward the middle of the house near the north side entrance. The locations of former chimneys suggest that the kitchen was located toward the southwestern rear corner of the house, with access to the rear yard, similar to the present-day location (Figure 8). Given domestic norms of the era, public functions likely occurred in the front rooms

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<sup>5</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Sept. 20, 1940, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph875080/m1/4>.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, Mirmiran & Thompson and Cox McLain, *Historic Resources Survey of Aransas, Refugio, and Calhoun Counties, Refugio County Survey Report*, May 2023, page 113.

<sup>7</sup> Katharine E. Henkel and Bobbye Warrick, *Sketches of Refugio* (n.p., n.d.), from the Rockport Public Library.

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downstairs. Local sources noted that “The house boasts a drawing room, an informal and formal dining room, a parlor and music room, among others” – all of which reflect patterns of living in the late Victorian era and therefore likely date to the original construction.<sup>8</sup> Upstairs, corner rooms with porch access likely served as bedrooms for more high-profile family members and guests, since they would have received the most ventilation and natural light (similar to Figure 9). The present-day floor plan suggests that the 1903 house included only one bathroom located upstairs (Figure 9).

The Mitchell-Simmons House (1940) (Photos 1-8)

*Exterior*

Newspaper articles indicate that the house was substantially remodeled in 1940 (Figure 10).<sup>9</sup> The design for the 1940 remodel of the house by architect Irving Dunbar aimed to simplify the irregular Queen Anne massing and replace the ornamentation with Classical Revival architectural details.<sup>10</sup> The south and north sides of the house were expanded outward, enclosing portions of the side porches, so that the side wings would be encompassed by the main central block of the house. (Contrast the footprint shown in the 1935 Sanborn map in Figure 7 against Photos 3-4) The two front-facing gables were removed from the roof form, and one large central triangular pediment was added above the entrance (Figure 4, 21).<sup>11</sup> The original roofing material was replaced with asbestos shingles (Figure 10). The porch profile was changed to remove the octagonal projection from the northeast corner and replace it with a curving profile mimicking the southeast corner – giving the front façade more symmetry. To support the new central pediment above the front entrance, two pairs of monumental fluted wood Corinthian columns were added in front of the original porch (Figure 21-22; Photo 1). On the original portion of the porch, the posts were replaced with Tuscan wood columns. The number of porch bays was altered also, using seven bays rather than eight – again adding more emphasis to the central bay and enhancing the front façade’s symmetry. The turned balusters, spindle frieze, and jigsaw brackets all were removed from the porch. New balusters were installed on the second floor of the porch only, with boxed wood pilasters under the Tuscan columns to help create the heavier proportions associated with the Classical Revival style (temporarily removed during ongoing 2023 rehabilitation). The 1940 remodel also included installation of a line of balusters along the porch roof, which helped create a horizontal emphasis and minimized the visibility of the original steep roof (Figures 4, 5 – missing today). The remodeling appears to have maintained the original siding and windows where feasible, and new exterior walls used matching siding and windows with comparable proportions. One exception is the rear porch enclosure, which uses a smaller window (Photo 3). The original front door was replaced with a new door with full height glazing with a geometric grid of lights (Photo 13; this replacement may date closer to 1920, given the era of popularity of the Prairie style). New doors leading from the porch to the side additions also used this Prairie style glazing pattern (Photo 9). Wood shutters and window screens also appear to have been added at the time of the 1940 remodel, along with wood screen doors. The shutters were temporarily removed during 2023 rehabilitation.

*Interior (Photos 9-11)*

The 1940 renovation also resulted in expansion and reconfiguration of the interior spaces. A comparison of the present-day configuration of the first floor with the Sanborn map suggests that the north side porch was enclosed and extended to create a half bath (to the rear/west of the north side entry) and a portion of the south side wraparound porch was enclosed to create a sunroom (Figure 8). On the second floor, changes to the floor plan appear to have included the addition of two bathrooms on the north side of the house and a second sunroom on the

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<sup>8</sup> *Sketches of Refugio*.

<sup>9</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 25, 1940, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874909/m1/1/>.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture*, (New York: Alfred Knop, 2014), 344-370, 433-446.

<sup>11</sup> The front façade and particularly the triangular pediment is partially obscured by mature vegetation making it difficult to photograph.

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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south side of the house (Figure 9). Some of the glass doors that originally led onto the sides of the wraparound porch now open into interior rooms (Photo 9). The interior millwork and finishes were also updated to reference the Classical Revival style, with segmental-arched openings from room to room, fanlight transoms above interior doors, and crown molding with dentils (Photos 10-11). After completing the remodeling project, the owners of the house chose to furnish the house with European antiques:

Mr. and Mrs. Simmons had furnished the house with collectors' items which were sold in an auction following their deaths. Among them were oriental rugs, Baccarat chandeliers, Louis XV and Louis XVI furniture, and important Meissen and Dresden pieces. Some original Whelan furniture, noticeably small in comparison to modern furniture, was withheld from the auction.<sup>12</sup>

The choice of European antiques sheds light on interpretation of the meaning intended by the Classical Revival style also, suggesting that Mr. and Mrs. Simmons sought to emphasize their own European roots at a time when European lineage was connected to political and economic power in Refugio (as further discussed under Section 8).

The Mitchell-Simmons Garage (1940)

The extant wood frame garage dates from the time of the 1940 remodel, replacing the early garage and auxiliary dwelling shown on the 1935 Sanborn map. The extant garage has two overhead door openings with a front-gabled roof (Photo 12). The structure, exterior siding, and doors all are wood. The garage uses simple beveled clapboard siding, rather than the more decorative Dutch lap siding used for the main house. Both original wood overhead rolling garage doors remain intact, each featuring a five-by-two grid of panels. A pent roof shelters the garage door openings. Although storm damage and age have caused deterioration of the paint and some wood elements, the overall form, design, and original materials remain intact.

**Alterations**

The Mitchell-Simmons House

Between 1940 and 2023, the Mitchell-Simmons House experienced relatively few alterations to its overall form and massing. The original chimneys remained intact after the 1940 remodel, but they were removed or destroyed by the 1970s (Figures 4 and 5). The low masonry perimeter wall visible in photos from around 1940 was removed as well, also at an unknown date. At some point, a small one-story addition was constructed toward the rear of the southern side façade (Photos 3, 5). This addition likely postdates the 1940 remodel. Its massing lacks the finesse and attention to detail devoted to the 1940 alterations, and the siding is simple clapboard rather than Dutch lap. Other changes to the property resulted from water infiltration, vegetative growth encouraged by water infiltration, and erosion exacerbated by storms. The increasing severity of tropical storms and hurricanes challenges the stability of a house designed for a milder climate. For example, at some point before 2008 the flat portion of the roof (the original "widow's walk" area) was given a slope with a front-to-back ridgeline, creating the complicated stepped roof form visible today (Photo 1). This alteration seems to have been designed to stop leaking in the area. In 2011, the 1940 asbestos shingle roof was replaced with a galvanized aluminum standing seam metal roof to strengthen the house's resistance to storms. The 1940 balusters along the porch roof appear to have been removed at the time of the 2011 roof replacement.

This new roof withstood Hurricane Harvey in 2017, but the hurricane's devastating winds and rain caused severe paint and wood damage, and the foundation sustained damage causing movement in framing that has now been stabilized. A current rehabilitation project aims to mitigate damage caused by Hurricane Harvey. Repair work

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<sup>12</sup> *Sketches of Refugio.*

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partially funded by the Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund grant from the National Park Service began in May 2023, is almost entirely limited to the exterior, and is ongoing as of December 2023. The work was approved by the Texas Historical Commission and is being carried out in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Work that has been completed thus far included the removal of vegetation from the exterior, sanding of rear of the house in preparation of repainting, removal of some Tuscan wood columns and balustrades, and the installation of shoring to provide support for the porch until repairs are completed. Other exterior work included removal of shutters and various plumbing repairs (compare Figures 21-22 with Photos 1-2). Interior work was limited to the replacement of the vent stack in the master bath as part of the plumbing repairs. Replacement and/or repair of key character defining features, especially on the porch, remain ongoing. Despite the alterations and damage accumulated over time, the house retains the overwhelming majority of its original materials and character defining features.

The Mitchell-Simmons Garage

The garage appears unaltered and retains its integrity of location, design, setting, feeling, and association. Today, wind and weather have stripped the paint from the exterior wood, and vegetative growth has penetrated the walls and roof, threatening to impair the building's integrity of materials and workmanship. However, the current rehabilitation project aims to address this threat.

**Integrity**

Despite changes over the years and damage from Hurricane Harvey, the Mitchell-Simmons House retains a high level of historic integrity. The house remains in its original location, and the historic setting is largely unchanged. While the original garage and auxiliary dwelling were removed during the 1940 remodel, the current garage retains integrity to that period. Integrity of design, materials, and workmanship are visible in the intact two-story wood-frame irregular form and wraparound porch, symmetrical façade, hipped with cross-gabled roof, and the full-height entry porch with triangular pediment supported by monumental Corinthian columns—hallmarks of Classical Revival architecture. Some original siding and windows, and historic-age doors all remain intact. While the Tuscan columns and balustrades on the second floor porch and shutters were temporarily removed during the rehabilitation, these features will be repaired or replaced in-kind and original character restored. The floor plan reconfigured in 1940 appears mostly intact and the interior millwork and finishes added in the remodel are extant. With these aspects combined, the Mitchell-Simmons House conveys the feeling of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Classical Revival residence inhabited by local social and political elites. It is no longer associated with the Mitchell or Simmons families.

**Contributing Resources**

Both the Mitchell-Simmons House and garage contribute to the historic character of the property.

*Table 7-1. Inventory of contributing resources.*

Resource	Construction Date	Contributing Status
Mitchell-Simmons House	1902-1903 (remodeled 1940)	Contributing
Mitchell-Simmons Garage	1940	Contributing

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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## Statement of Significance

The Mitchell-Simmons House is located at 904 Commerce Street in Refugio, Texas. The property remained in the Mitchell and Simmons families from 1834 until 1976. The first house on the lot, constructed around 1834, was demolished around 1900. The current house was originally designed in 1902 by prominent regional architect Jules Leffland in the Queen Anne style for the family of Josephine O'Brien Mitchell (granddaughter of the original landowner) and Oscar Mitchell, a successful stock raiser. Daughter Mary Agnes ("Maddie") Mitchell inherited the house in 1935 and married oilman William Joseph ("Joe") Simmons in 1938. Joe Simmons drilled a series of lucrative oil wells on Maddie's inherited ranch lands, and in 1940, the couple used their oil revenues to help fund a substantial remodeling project. Local architect Irving Dunbar transformed the exterior and interior in the Classical Revival style. Local builder George Strauch likely supplied lumber for both the original 1902-1903 construction and the 1940 remodel. The property is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of Architecture as an outstanding local example of Classical Revival residential architecture. It represents an important chapter in the works of architect Jules Leffland, builder George Strauch, and architect Irving Dunbar. These men established successful careers in the Refugio area and became favorites among the local elite seeking to communicate their social, economic, and political status using architecture. The Mitchell and Simmons families consciously partnered with these prominent firms to exhibit their wealth and place in affluent society. The period of significance is 1940 when the house was remodeled.

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## Brief Historic Context

### Early Settlement Patterns

Land disputes and conflict marked the settlement of Refugio County as early as 1793, when Spanish Catholic priests founded the mission of Nuestra Señora del Refugio at the confluence of the San Antonio and Guadalupe Rivers, on land that the native Karankawa prized as a campground.<sup>13</sup> This new mission site evolved into the town of Refugio. The Spanish government granted homestead lands to an estimated 100 early settlers by 1830.<sup>14</sup> Around the same time, the newly independent Republic of Mexico sought to increase settlement in Texas through a system of "empresarios"—or land agents—authorized to recruit Catholic colonists from Europe and the United States with the promise of homestead land grants.<sup>15</sup> In 1828, two Irish-born merchants residing in Saltillo, Mexico—James Power and James Hewetson—received an empresario grant for ten leagues of land (46,055 acres) encompassing Refugio, with permission "to introduce 400 Roman Catholic families, half of whom would be native Mexicans and the other half natives of Ireland."<sup>16</sup> Portions of the Power and Hewetson grant overlapped with prior land grants to Mexican families. Between 1828 and 1834, Power recruited 300 Irish families, most of whom lived modestly in County Wexford. No Mexican families were recruited.<sup>17</sup> Land disputes from earlier settlers placed the empresario grant in question until 1831, delaying the arrival of the Irish colonists until 1834.<sup>18</sup>

When the Irish colonists finally arrived in Refugio County in 1834, they immediately encountered further land disputes and political unrest. The Karankawa tried to protect their ancestral lands, and earlier settlers continued to

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<sup>13</sup> Lucile Fagan Snider, *A Pictorial History of Refugio County* (Austin, Texas: Nortex Press, n.d.), 1

<sup>14</sup> Leffler, "Refugio County."

<sup>15</sup> Eugene C. Barker, "Empresario," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed September 14, 2022, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/empresario](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/empresario).

<sup>16</sup> *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 6. See the boundaries of the "Powers Grant" in "Texas 1835" [Map] in Thomas Gamaliel Bradford, *Comprehensive Atlas, Geographical, Historical and Commercial* (n.p., 1835), from UT, [maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/bradford-texas-1835-01.jpg](http://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/bradford-texas-1835-01.jpg).

<sup>17</sup> *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Leffler, "Refugio County;" Snider, *A Pictorial History*, 1

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dispute the Irish colonists' land grants. Mexican land commissioners eventually settled disputes by granting Power and Hewetson only four-and-a-half leagues of land (20,724 acres) and specifying that the core of the settlement would be in the location of present-day Refugio, with town lots and outlying homestead lots subdivided as specified by the land commission. These land divisions established development patterns that continue in Refugio today. For example, the 1834 land commission called for a central town square with governmental buildings set to the west – as seen in the present-day courthouse square, with the Refugio County Courthouse to the west (Figure 11, Maps 1-2).<sup>19</sup> The old mission site continued to influence town development patterns as well.<sup>20</sup> The lot for the Mitchell-Simmons House dates to this 1834 land subdivision.

Land commission decisions dating back to 1834 also affected patterns of cultural heritage still found in the area today. Land was granted free of cost – with the exception of taxes and fees.<sup>21</sup> This enabled colonists with little wealth to come to Texas and become landowners.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Power and Hewetson petitioned the Mexican government to allow land grants to settlers from not just Ireland, but also the United States, Scotland, England, Germany, Canada, Italy, and Greece. As a result, Refugio and the surrounding areas developed a more European and American cultural character than initially envisioned. Refugio was the site of the Battle of Refugio during the Texas Revolution in March 1836. Refugio County was established when Texas became a state, and Refugio was named the county seat.<sup>23</sup>

#### Local Economic Trends

Refugio's landscape supported cattle ranching from the time of the earliest Spanish mission settlement. By 1845, tallow and hide factories emerged in Refugio as well, although the lack of a railroad connection hindered the industry's growth.<sup>24</sup> Cattle had to be driven overland to Fort Worth or shipped via barge to New Orleans until a rail connection reached nearby Victoria in 1861. The Civil War destroyed Victoria's rail connection, however, crippling the cattle industry nearby and leaving the town of Refugio nearly deserted. Reconstruction of the rail line in the 1870s allowed the cattle industry to recover, and additional rail links in the 1880s drove regional growth. By the early twentieth century, irrigation development nearby helped encourage the growth of farming – especially cotton.<sup>25</sup> The town of Refugio finally received a railroad connection in 1905, helping local commerce to grow. The cotton industry declined by the 1930s with the Great Depression, but the discovery of oil nearby buoyed the local economy. From about 1920 through about 1948, oil production grew continually in Refugio County, creating economic prosperity and spurring population growth.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> "Our Lady of Refuge Catholic Church (Atlas Number 5391003886)," Official Texas Historical Marker (OTHM), 1994, from the Texas Historical Commission (THC), Texas Historic Sites Atlas (Atlas), [atlas.thc.state.tx.us/Details/5391003886](https://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/Details/5391003886).

<sup>21</sup> The costs of taxes and fees vary from source to source. According to *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, they amounted to only about \$30 for each league (4,428 acres) of pastureland or \$3.50 for each labor (177 acres) of non-irrigable labor (p. 9). In 2022 dollars, this would amount to only about \$5,000 per acre of pastureland or about \$1,700 per acre of non-irrigable land ("Value of \$1 from 1834 to 2022," CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed 09/14/2022, [www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1834?amount=1](https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1834?amount=1)). An alternate source states that: "The town tract appears to have been particularly subdivided into farm lots or 'exidos,' at an early day. Although the first recorded sales of farm lots appears to have been in 1847, when land was sold for 60 cents per acre, it appears that the farming land along Mission River was used by the settlers from the time of their arrival in the 1830's. Mrs. Priour says that in 1834 the farms along the river were worked in common by the colonists" [*Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 7, 1932, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1159481](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1159481)]. In 2022 dollars, that would be only about \$20 per acre ("Value of \$1 from 1834 to 2022"). Taxes and fees "could be deferred for four years, with three equal installments, and the whole was to be in six years" (*The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 9).

<sup>22</sup> Snider, *A Pictorial History*, 226.

<sup>23</sup> John Leffler, "Refugio, Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed October 1, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Leffler, "Refugio County."

<sup>25</sup> Leffler, "Refugio County," HHM "The Historic Resources of Victoria," National Register of Historic Place (NRHP) Multiple Property Submission (MPS), Austin, THC, 1986.

<sup>26</sup> Leffler, "Refugio County."

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Local Development Patterns in the Early Twentieth Century

Throughout the nineteenth century, development in Refugio was sparse and small-scale. Most buildings were clustered near the old mission site and the town square. In the 1890s and early 1900s, several new, grand homes were built in response to the rebound in the cattle and cotton markets. Yet prior to the arrival of the railroad in December 1905, one source described the town of Refugio as limited to: “the convent, a hotel, two saloons, a blacksmith shop, about five stores, the wooden county courthouse, and a ‘handful’ of dwellings.”<sup>27</sup> When the railroad arrived, it ran north-to-south east of the main square along Palmetto Street, and the new depot was constructed about a mile north of the square. New town lots were platted near the depot, and the center of town shifted northward.<sup>28</sup> A series of civic improvements quickly followed. County roads through the town were paved by 1906, a private committee funded construction of an auditorium in 1907, and a new brick county courthouse was constructed in 1917.<sup>29</sup> Highway maps show U.S. Highway 77 traveling through town along Alamo Street by 1936.<sup>30</sup> With the new oil wealth and increased accessibility provided by the highway, improvements in the 1930s included:

- A brick post office;
- A new brick City Hall with dual use as a fire station funded by the Public Works Administration (designed by architect Irving Dunbar, who would go on to remodel the Mitchell-Simmons House);<sup>31</sup>
- A new school building at Our Lady of Refuge, completed in 1939.<sup>32</sup>

By the following decade, “A pamphlet published in 1946 by the city pointed to Refugio's paved streets, sewer system, fire department, and modern county hospital as evidence of its prosperity and development.”<sup>33</sup>

**The Mitchell-Simmons Property: Historic Owners and Occupants**

Mary Whelan (1814-1883), Michael Whelan (1801–ca. 1880), and Family

Understanding the deep roots of the Mitchell-Simmons family in Refugio is essential for understanding why the family valued architecture as a tool for maintaining social and economic status. The lot encompassing the present-day Mitchell-Simmons House was granted to Irish immigrants Michael and Mary Whelan (alternately spelled “Whalen,” “Whalon,” or “Whaling”), who came to Texas with the Power colonists in 1834. The eldest Whelan son, Michael Jr., was born in Ireland in 1830 and immigrated with his parents.<sup>34</sup> Around 1834, the Whelan family acquired the property at present-day 904 Commerce Street in Refugio, although it is unclear whether they received a land grant or purchased the town property.<sup>35</sup> On this property, Whelan constructed a one-and-a-half-story house with a rectangular footprint, a full-width front porch, a side-gabled roof form, and external chimneys at both gable

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<sup>27</sup> Leffland, “Refugio, TX.”

<sup>28</sup> *Refugio, Texas* [Map], Sanborn Fire Insurance Company [Sanborn], 1935, sheet 1, from UT, [maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/p-r/txu-sanborn-refugio-1935-1.jpg](https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/p-r/txu-sanborn-refugio-1935-1.jpg).

<sup>29</sup> *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 23; *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 14, 1934, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph757450/m1/7](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph757450/m1/7).

<sup>30</sup> *General Highway Map, Refugio County, Texas* [Map], Texas State Highway Department, 1936 (revised to 1940), from the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, [www.tsl.texas.gov/apps/arc/maps/maplookup/04979](https://www.tsl.texas.gov/apps/arc/maps/maplookup/04979).

<sup>31</sup> *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 231-233; “Refugio City Hall,” Travel South Texas, accessed Sept. 22, 2022, <http://www.stxmaps.com/go/texas-historical-marker-refugio-city-hall.html>.

<sup>32</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Feb. 23, 1940, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874558](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874558).

<sup>33</sup> Leffland, “Refugio, TX.”

<sup>34</sup> Various records, Ancestry.com; *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 9, 1932, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1163899/m1/4](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1163899/m1/4).

<sup>35</sup> One source listing original town lot grants does not list Whelan among the grantees of original town lots. See *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 7, 1932.

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ends (Figure 1). In 1839, Michael Whelan, Sr. received a grant of 320 acres in rural Refugio County, helping the family to support themselves through agriculture for generations.<sup>36</sup>

For the remainder of the nineteenth century, the property housed the Whelan family and friends brought into the household. The Whelan family grew to include two daughters, Johanna (born around 1834) and Mary (born around 1837). Around 1840, the Whelan home also welcomed John M. O'Brien, as the nephew of empresario James Power, then around 16 years old.<sup>37</sup> Son Michael Whelan, Jr. appears to have left home prior to 1850, and in 1858 he married Bridget O'Brien Bower – sister of John M. O'Brien, niece of empresario James Power, and widow of influential Texas Revolutionary John White Bower.<sup>38</sup> Around 1850, the property also sheltered a Catholic priest named James Jeradaun, born in France.<sup>39</sup> Johanna Whelan and John M. O'Brien married in 1857 and moved into their own home.<sup>40</sup> John M. O'Brien inherited substantial ranch lands outside of Refugio and later became a prominent stock raiser.<sup>41</sup> Daughter Mary wed merchant Patrick Shelly in 1866 and moved away also.<sup>42</sup> Michael Whelan, Sr. appears to have lived in the house until his death around 1880, as did his wife Mary until around the time of her death in 1883.<sup>43</sup>

Over the years, the Whelan property also housed several laborers, likely in the auxiliary building. A historical recollection in the *Refugio Timely Remarks* newspaper recorded that “There were few negroes in the town of Refugio” in the 1860s, but “Michael Whelan had house servants.”<sup>44</sup> The 1860 census enumerated the family of Michael and Mary “Whaling” in the town of Refugio, and that same year census slave schedules listed a slave owner named “M. Whaling” owning three enslaved persons – one 40-year-old “Mulatto” female, one 13-year-old “Mulatto” female, and one 7-month-old “Black” male.<sup>45</sup> Ten years later, in 1870, the census noted Michael “Whalon”—a stock raiser—living with wife Mary, a 20-year-old Black woman named Ellen employed as a “house servant,” and a 10-year-old Black boy named Charles “without occupation” (likely the infant living in the home in 1860).<sup>46</sup> The 1880 census similarly listed M. Whelan—farmer and stock raiser—living with wife Mary and a Black woman, age 17, named “Lydia O'Brien” working as a “domestic servant.”<sup>47</sup> Note that their children Michael, Jr. and Johanna both were married to members of the O'Brien family, and the “O'Bryan” family also was listed among slaveholders in Refugio in the 1860 census slave schedule. It is likely that Lydia O'Brien was born into slavery with the O'Brien family in 1863.

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<sup>36</sup> Texas GLO Land Grant Search, File No. 000020, [s3.glo.texas.gov/ncu/SCANDocs/archives\\_webfiles/arcmaps/webfiles/landgrants/PDFs/1/0/6/2/1062574.pdf](https://s3.glo.texas.gov/ncu/SCANDocs/archives_webfiles/arcmaps/webfiles/landgrants/PDFs/1/0/6/2/1062574.pdf). Note that the date of this land grant suggests that it was awarded for service in the Texas Revolution, but neither “Whelan” nor an alternate spelling shows up in the “Name Index to Military Bounty and Donation Land Grants of Texas,” in Thomas Lloyd Miller, *Bounty and Donation Land Grants of Texas, 1885-1888* (Austin: UT Press, 1967), from the Texas State Historical Association, [supsites.tshaonline.org/military/rep\\_bd.htm](https://supsites.tshaonline.org/military/rep_bd.htm).

<sup>37</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 9, 1932.

<sup>38</sup> Various records, Ancestry.com; *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 9, 1932; L. W. Kemp, “Bower, John White,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed September 19, 2022, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/bower-john-white](https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/bower-john-white); “John White Bower (Atlas Number 5391006483),” Texas Centennial Marker, 1936, from the THC Atlas, [atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/5391006483](https://atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/5391006483).

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Federal Census Records (Census), 1850, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1068173:8054](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1068173:8054).

<sup>40</sup> “John O'Brien,” Texas, U.S., Select County Marriage Index, 1837-1965, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2504175:60183](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2504175:60183).

<sup>41</sup> Census, 1870, Refugio Township, Subdivision 4, Refugio County, Texas, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/5301387:7163](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/5301387:7163).

<sup>42</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jan. 29, 1937, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph912746/m1/7](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph912746/m1/7).

<sup>43</sup> “Michael Whelan” and “Mary Whelan,” U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s-Current, from Ancestry.

<sup>44</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 24, 1937, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph912736/m1/6](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph912736/m1/6).

<sup>45</sup> Census, 1860, Refugio County, from Ancestry [www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7668/images/txm653\\_1311-0621](https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7668/images/txm653_1311-0621), [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/35463012:7667](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/35463012:7667). Note that the slave schedule for Refugio township lists 51 individuals in as slave owners.

<sup>46</sup> Census, 1870, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/14577558:7163](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/14577558:7163).

<sup>47</sup> Census, 1880, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/11524844:6742](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/11524844:6742).

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Josephine O'Brien Mitchell (1863–1934), Oscar Mitchell (1854–ca. 1915), and Family

*Whelan Family Occupancy*

Josephine O'Brien Mitchell—a granddaughter of Mary and Michael Whelan—appears to have moved into her grandparents' house at some point during the 1880s, along with her husband Oscar Mitchell. Josephine grew up outside of town with her parents, Johanna Whelan O'Brien and rancher John M. O'Brien. Oscar Mitchell grew up in the nearby community of St. Mary's, about 15 miles south of Refugio on the shores of Copano Bay. His father, J.N. Mitchell, was a Texas-born lawyer who, by 1860, held 1,000 acres of land in St. Mary's as well as three enslaved persons.<sup>48</sup> By 1880, census records listed Oscar Mitchell working as a stock raiser and living in a boarding house in Refugio – where he met his future wife Josephine.<sup>49</sup> Josephine married cattleman Oscar Mitchell in 1882.<sup>50</sup> Together, the couple lost a baby in 1883 and then had four children that survived to adulthood – daughter Johanna Isabella in 1885, daughter Mary Agnes ("Maddie") in 1886, daughter Francis in 1888, and son John Newton in 1890 (Figure 12).<sup>51</sup> Census records from 1890 are largely missing, but records from 1900 enumerate one domestic servant living on the property – Russel Davis, a 47-year-old black man, born in Missouri, working as a "servant."<sup>52</sup> The Mitchells also came and went frequently from their ranch properties – including fertile pasture land in an area called "Corn Bend" located "about a mile and a half below the Town of Refugio on the south side of Mission River," as well "the Placido" in Victoria County.<sup>53</sup> The Mitchell family likely maintained a second residence on their ranch, and they also likely employed numerous laborers on their farm and ranch properties.

While residing in the old Whelan House, the Mitchell family gained social and political status, aided by their family connections. In addition to their parents' wealth, Josephine's uncle Patrick Shelly rose to prominence as a merchant and "served in almost every public office of Refugio County. He was mayor of Refugio in 1848, town secretary from 1849 to 1852, county clerk from 1852 to 1862, alderman in 1856 to 1866 and 1868 to 1875, and county judge from 1866 to 1868."<sup>54</sup> Josephine's brother, John M. O'Brien, Jr., expanded his father's ranching enterprise, partnered with Oscar Mitchell on stock raising deals, and became president of the First National Bank of Refugio.<sup>55</sup> These connections helped Oscar Mitchell gain a position as a Refugio county commissioner by the 1890s.<sup>56</sup> As Refugio began to grow and change in the 1890s and early 1900s, the family began to look to architecture to

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<sup>48</sup> Census, 1860, Refugio County, from Ancestry [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/35152376:7667](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/35152376:7667), [www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7668/images/txm653\\_1311-0619](http://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7668/images/txm653_1311-0619).

<sup>49</sup> Census, 1920, Refugio County, Refugio, District 127, p. 6, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7210144:6742](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7210144:6742).

<sup>50</sup> "Josephine O'Brien," Texas, U.S., Select County Marriage Index, 1837-1965, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2507444:60183](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2507444:60183).

<sup>51</sup> "Mount Calvary Cemetery," Find a Grave Index, [www.findagrave.com/cemetery/5366/mount-calvary-cemetery](http://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/5366/mount-calvary-cemetery); Census, 1900, Refugio County, Refugio, District 0070, p. 6, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/70958496:7602](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/70958496:7602); Census, 1920, Refugio County, Refugio, Justice Precinct 1, District 0148, p. 8, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/28507417:7884](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/28507417:7884).

<sup>52</sup> Census, 1900, Refugio District 0070, Refugio County, Texas, from Ancestry [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/70958495:7602](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/70958495:7602). Additional research is needed, but it appears possible that Davis held family connections to the Black community in St. Mary's and/or the Mitchell family in St. Mary's. According to the 1880 census, a Black man named Moses Davis lived in St. Mary's with eight children (but no Russel, although Russel would have been old enough to have lived on his own at the time) (Census, 1880, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/11525251:6742](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/11525251:6742)). By 1930, census records showed a Black family named Davis, a Black family named Mitchell, and white family named Davis all living neighboring one another on McDowell road in Refugio Precinct 8 District 11 outside Austwell (Census, 1930, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/61355217:6224](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/61355217:6224)).

<sup>53</sup> *The Refugio Review* Jan. 27, 1899, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph848996/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph848996/); *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Feb. 10, 1933, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1160029/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1160029/); *The Refugio Review*, Jan. 29, 1904, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739185/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739185/). One article states that "One of the principal farming areas [in the early colonial days] appears to have been what was then known as 'Corn Bend,' now a part of Mrs. Josephine Mitchell's pasture" (*Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 7, 1922).

<sup>54</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jan. 29, 1937.

<sup>55</sup> *The History of Refugio County, Texas*, 153; *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 9, 1932; *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Mar. 22, 1901, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph849054/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph849054/).

<sup>56</sup> *The Refugio Review* Apr. 28, 1899, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph849029/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph849029/).

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communicate their prominence in the community. Other families with connections to Refugio's founders began to construct new grand, high-style houses. For example, in 1896, Josephine's brother John M. O'Brien, Jr. built a new house in Refugio designed by architect Jules Leffland (Figure 13, likely historically at 1009 Commerce Street, no longer extant) – inspiring Josephine and Oscar Mitchell to build a new house in the years to come.<sup>57</sup>

*Construction and Occupancy of the Mitchell House on the Whelan Property*

In 1902, the Mitchells commissioned architect Jules Leffland of Victoria to design and construct a larger, more elaborate house for their family, located on the old Whelan property. The elaborate design communicated an ambition to hold onto the family's social prominence in a growing and changing town, and the layout of the house included spaces that would allow the family to entertain larger groups in the grand manner popularized during the Victorian era. The Mitchells dubbed their new house "Anaqua," named after a small evergreen tree with white flowers native to south Texas and/or the small community of the same name between Refugio and Victoria on the north bank of the San Antonio River, home to artesian wells.<sup>58</sup>

After completing their new, larger Queen Anne house in 1903, the Mitchell family continued to play prominent political and social roles in the community of Refugio. Oscar Mitchell continued to serve as a county commissioner in the early 1900s. Josephine gained a notable social and charitable reputation. As a hostess, Josephine entertained a diverse circle of friends, including women with Spanish surnames, despite the prevailing segregationist attitudes of the day.<sup>59</sup> Her charitable work included taking care of local parks, especially "King Memorial Park" in the courthouse square across from her house. As noted in her obituary, "During her lifetime the late Mrs. Josephine Mitchell had the park looked after and saw to it that the grass was cut and the grounds kept beautiful, many times, it is said, using her own money to pay for its upkeep."<sup>60</sup> Josephine Mitchell's charitable work also included diverse outreach, and upon her death, a local "committee of pioneer colored people" published a resolution mourning her death in 1934 (Figure 14).<sup>61</sup> Notably, from 1910 onward census records do not show any domestic employees or tenants residing on the Mitchell property, although Sanborn maps show an auxiliary dwelling on the property until at least 1935. The family likely employed domestic laborers who lived elsewhere, however, especially considering policies of spatial segregation that were becoming more prevalent nationwide in this era. The family also was known to employ a "crowd of work hands" at their ranching properties.<sup>62</sup>

Family members ebbed and flowed from the large house between 1903 and 1934. Around 1904, Maddie briefly lived in San Antonio to study music.<sup>63</sup> Johanna Isabella moved out upon her marriage to merchant Ben Shelton around 1910 but continued to live nearby.<sup>64</sup> After Oscar Mitchell died around 1915, his wife Josephine and three of their grown children continued to live in the house.<sup>65</sup> Shortly thereafter, in 1916, Francis died of kidney disease,

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<sup>57</sup> *Sketches of Refugio; Refugio, Texas* [Map], Sanborn Fire Insurance Company [Sanborn], 1935, sheet 5; Census, 1940, Refugio County, from Ancestry, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157848916:2442>; "Parade of Homes," Refugio County Chamber of Commerce, updated 2022, <https://www.refugiocountytexas.org/community/parade-of-homes>. The 1940 Census lists the John M. O'Brien family living adjacent to the John J. O'Brien family (known to live at 1003 Commerce Street, extant). The 1935 Sanborn map shows a house with a footprint that resembles the photograph of the John M. O'Brien House located just south of 1003 Commerce Street, at present-day 1009 Commerce Street.

<sup>58</sup> *Texas: Goliad Quadrangle* [Map], US Geological Survey (USGS), 1909, from the University of Texas (UT), [maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/topo/texas/txu-pclmaps-topo-tx-goliad-1909.jpg](https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/topo/texas/txu-pclmaps-topo-tx-goliad-1909.jpg). Mitchell may have owned agricultural land near Anaqua and named the house after the land that provided his wealth, but additional deed research would be necessary to confirm the locations of the family's rural landholdings.

<sup>59</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jun. 26, 1931, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1159500](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1159500).

<sup>60</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 26, 1934, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098690](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098690).

<sup>61</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Sept. 28, 1934, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098410](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098410).

<sup>62</sup> *The Refugio Review*, Nov. 6, 1903, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739118](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739118).

<sup>63</sup> *The Refugio Review*, Mar. 25, 1904, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739080](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph739080).

<sup>64</sup> Census, 1910, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/28507425:7884](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/28507425:7884).

<sup>65</sup> Census, 1910, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/145660317:7884](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/145660317:7884).

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never having married or left home.<sup>66</sup> Josephine's other two children, Maddie and John N. Mitchell, lived with their mother until her death in 1934.<sup>67</sup> John N. Mitchell worked as ranch manager for his family's properties and appears to have also kept a home outside of town.

Mary Agnes "Maddie" Mitchell Simmons (1886–1965) and William Joseph "Joe" Simmons (1887–1948)

*Mitchell House Occupancy*

After her mother's death in 1934, Maddie Mitchell became executrix of her mother's estate and ultimately inherited the house at 904 Commerce Street.<sup>68</sup> For the next few years, Maddie lived an active life as an independent woman. She played a leadership role in the local chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas and other local organizations. In 1938, she published a small book titled *The First Flag of Texas Independence* based on letters from the Texas Revolution sent by her grandfather and uncle. Ms. Mitchell's book is still cited today in the *Handbook of Texas*.<sup>69</sup> She also served as a delegate to the Refugio County Democratic Convention in 1938.<sup>70</sup> During these years, Maddie Mitchell met William Joseph ("Joe") Simmons, an oil man who began traveling to Refugio during the oil boom of the 1930s. Joe Simmons was born in Tyler County, Texas, in 1887.<sup>71</sup> He may have been married and had a family in East Texas and/or Louisiana in the 1910s and 1920s, but records are unclear. In 1932, City Directories document Joe Simmons still living in his hometown of Tyler, running the "Simmons & Means Drilling Company."<sup>72</sup> By 1935, Simmons had moved to Houston.<sup>73</sup> From 1937 onward, Refugio newspapers began routinely noting Joe Simmons in association with oil discoveries, mineral leases, and land purchases – frequently travelling between Houston, Refugio, and Mexico.

That same year, in 1937, a newspaper article described Simmons as "prominent oil and business man of Refugio" – publicizing his permanent relocation to town.<sup>74</sup> Simmons changed his residence to the Mission Hotel, located around the corner from the Mitchell House in Refugio.<sup>75</sup> Simmons apparently purchased the hotel, placed it under new management, and marketed it as "Refugio's European hotel."<sup>76</sup> Local memory recalls that the new City Hall building often hosted dances upstairs, located conveniently close to the Mitchell House and the Mission Hotel. Both Maddie Mitchell and Joe Simmons routinely attended, although both were over 50 years old.<sup>77</sup> Maddie Mitchell

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<sup>66</sup> U.S. Death Certificates, Texas, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/23130345:2272](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/23130345:2272).

<sup>67</sup> Census, 1920, Refugio County, Refugio, District 01444, p. 12, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/113047545:6061](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/113047545:6061); Census, 1930, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/61353189:6224](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/61353189:6224).

<sup>68</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 5, 1934, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1098176](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1098176).

<sup>69</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jan. 7, 1938, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1164009](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1164009); Craig H. Roell, "Goliad Campaign of 1835," Handbook of Texas Online, accessed September 22, 2022, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/goliad-campaign-of-1835](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/goliad-campaign-of-1835); Hobart Huson, "James, John," Handbook of Texas Online, accessed September 22, 2022, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/james-john](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/james-john).

<sup>70</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jul. 29, 1938, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1163908](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1163908).

<sup>71</sup> "William Joseph Simmons," U.S., Find a Grave Index, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/71284394:60525](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/71284394:60525). Note that the Joe Simmons associated with the Mitchell-Simmons House in Refugio was *not* the same individual as the William Joseph Simmons affiliated with the KKK, who was born Alabama in 1880 and died in Atlanta in 1945.

<sup>72</sup> U.S. City Directories, Tyler, Texas, 1932, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/409879742:2469](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/409879742:2469); Tyler Texas [map], Sanborn, 1928, sheet 17, from UT, [maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/s-u/txu-sanborn-tyler\\_1928-17](http://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/s-u/txu-sanborn-tyler_1928-17). City Directories note his residence in 1932 as 513 W Ferguson – shown on Sanborn Maps to be a two-story frame house with an irregular Queen Anne footprint (no longer extant; the lot that currently is occupied by the Tyler City Hall, built in 1938).

<sup>73</sup> Census, 1940, Refugio County, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157848812:2442](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157848812:2442); US City Directories, Houston, Texas, 1935, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/398092212:2469](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/398092212:2469). The 1935 Houston City Directory notes his address as 3310 Palm Ave (a one-story brick Tudor, likely new at the time).

<sup>74</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Aug. 6, 1937, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth912740/m1/5](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth912740/m1/5).

<sup>75</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jan. 7, 1938.

<sup>76</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 31, 1937, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth912730](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth912730).

<sup>77</sup> "Mitchell-Simmons House," NRHP Determination of Eligibility (DOE), THC, 2021.

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married Joe Simmons in New Orleans on October 26, 1938. Maddie was 53 years old, and Joe was 52.<sup>78</sup> After returning from a honeymoon along the East Coast, Mr. and Mrs. Simmons moved into the old Mitchell House. The 1940 census documented William J. Simmons as a “retired oil operator” living on Commerce Street with his wife Mary A. and no children.<sup>79</sup>

*Mitchell-Simmons House Construction and Occupancy*

Around the same time, Simmons commissioned local architect Irving Dunbar to expand the old Mitchell House and remodel it in the Classical Revival style. Joe Simmons reportedly presented the remodeling project as a wedding gift for his new bride, although his wife’s property revenues likely funded the project.<sup>80</sup> During construction, the couple presumably resided at the Mission Hotel. Newspapers also frequently document the couple traveling “east” via railroad, likely collecting furnishings for the newly remodeled home and taking advantage of the construction as an opportunity to travel.<sup>81</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Simmons amassed a collection of European furnishings said to be one of the most valuable in Texas, which they integrated with the Mitchell family’s colonial heirlooms (Figure 15).<sup>82</sup> The couple’s time together in the new house was brief, though. Joe Simmons died April 22, 1948 in Refugio.<sup>83</sup> Causes of death were listed as a two-year battle with cirrhosis, complicated by a 20-year battle with gout.<sup>84</sup> Some local sources speculated that Maddie’s large land holdings were the source of Joe’s attraction to her, but Maddie profited off Joe’s oil developments on her land for years after his death, with the productivity of “Mary Simmons” wells repeatedly touted in local newspapers.<sup>85</sup> Maddie lived in the Mitchell-Simmons House until her death in 1975. She largely lived alone, although her brother John N. Mitchell apparently stayed with her when in Refugio.<sup>86</sup> Maddie Simmons died of a heart attack at home at 904 Commerce Street on May 7, 1975.<sup>87</sup> She was buried at Mount Calvary Cemetery in Refugio, less than a mile from the house, alongside her parents, siblings, and husband.<sup>88</sup>

Later Ownership and Occupancy

When she died, Maddie Mitchell left her estate to her great niece, Miguelita Whelan Finn.<sup>89</sup> Miguelita’s mother was Dr. Josephine Shelton, MD, daughter of Maddie’s oldest sister, Johanna Isabella Mitchell Shelton.<sup>90</sup> Like Maddie, Dr. Josephine Shelton was a rare independent woman in Refugio in the early twentieth century, earning her medical degree and setting up a gynecology practice in the 1930s, at the same time that Maddie was enjoying her independence as a single woman.<sup>91</sup> The antiques from Maddie Mitchell’s estate were sold at an auction in Corpus

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<sup>78</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Nov. 3, 1939, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098503/m1/8/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098503/m1/8/).

<sup>79</sup> Census, 1940, Refugio County, Refugio, District 196-1, p. 6, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157848812:2442](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157848812:2442).

<sup>80</sup> “Mitchell-Simmons House,” NRHP DOE.

<sup>81</sup> *The Weekly Advocate* and *Daily Advocate* (newspaper, Victoria, Texas), various dates, from Newspapers.com.

<sup>82</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* (newspaper), Nov. 16, 1975, from Newspapers.com, [www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/757307326/](http://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/757307326/).

<sup>83</sup> “William Joseph Simmons,” U.S., Find a Grave Index, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/71284394:60525](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/71284394:60525).

<sup>84</sup> US Death Certificates, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1064824:2272](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1064824:2272).

<sup>85</sup> “Two New Field Tests in County Are Scheduled,” *Victoria Advocate*, Sep. 13, 1948, p. 1, from Newspapers.com, [www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/439651796](http://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/439651796); “Oil & Gas Report,” *Victoria Advocate*, Aug. 14, 1966, p. 37, from Newspapers.com, [www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/439502078](http://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/439502078).

<sup>86</sup> Census, 1950, Refugio County, Refugio, District 196-5, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/193895140:62308](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/193895140:62308). The 1950 Census documents John N. Mitchell living with Maddie in Refugio, although other sources documenting him living in unincorporated Refugio County with his wife Birdie from 1940 until his death in 1966.

<sup>87</sup> US Death Certificates, Refugio County, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2272/images/33154\\_b062692-03386](http://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2272/images/33154_b062692-03386).

<sup>88</sup> Mount Calvary Cemetery, Find a Grave Index, [www.findagrave.com/cemetery/5366/mount-calvary-cemetery](http://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/5366/mount-calvary-cemetery).

<sup>89</sup> “Mitchell-Simmons House,” NRHP DOE.

<sup>90</sup> US Birth Index, Texas, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/5511123:878](http://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/5511123:878).

<sup>91</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jan. 16, 1941, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874663/m1/1](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874663/m1/1).

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Christi in 1975 (Figure 15).<sup>92</sup> In 1976, Miguelita Whelan Finn sold the property to Bill Wales and his family. Today, the property remains in the Wales family.

### **Criterion C: Architecture**

The Mitchell-Simmons House is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance. The house is an outstanding local example of the Classical Revival style of architecture and an important chapter in the catalog of works of architect Jules Leffland, builder George Strauch, and architect Irving Dunbar. Leffland, Strauch, and Dunbar all established prominent careers in the Refugio area and became favorites among the local elite seeking to communicate their social, economic, and political status using architecture. The Mitchell and Simmons families consciously partnered with these prominent firms to signify their membership in affluent society.

#### Classical Revival Style

The Queen Anne style eclipsed classically inspired styles popular in Refugio from the 1880s through about 1910 – as illustrated by the Mitchells' selection of the Queen Anne style for the original Mitchell House in 1902. By 1910, though, the Classical Revival style surged in popularity as new people and ideas began to arrive via the railroad. In the early twentieth century, the Classical Revival style became associated with the City Beautiful movement. This movement merged the clean, white Classical Revival aesthetic with a set of Progressive social reforms that aimed to improve urban sanitation, crime, and symbolize the upward trajectory of human civilization through beauty.<sup>93</sup> The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 promoted the City Beautiful movement, showcasing orderly geometric landscapes with broad vistas lined with white buildings featuring restrained Classical Revival stylistic detailing. City planners, architects, and other civic leaders connected City Beautiful aesthetic with Progressive ideals about sanitation, education, and reformed living conditions for the poor.

Grand institutional examples of the Classical Revival style used white stone masonry, but many residential examples adapted the style with wood construction. Regional adaptations of the Classical Revival style developed as well. In the American South, monumental columns often supported broad two-story porches with balconies, facilitating cross-ventilation and outdoor living in the hot summer months. Extant early examples of this characteristically southern interpretation of the Classical Revival style in Refugio include the 1910 West-Linney House at 403 East North Street and the 1910 Strauch-Allison House at 103 East Plausela Street.<sup>94</sup> The Classical Revival style also became one option in the eclectic array of historicist revival styles used for affluent suburban housing in the 1920s and 1930s. The River Oaks neighborhood of Houston was one of many that exemplified this trend. Coming from Houston as an aspiring oil baron, River Oaks homes would have symbolized success and affluence in the mind of Joe Simmons. Maddie Mitchell Simmons embodied the progressive spirit of the City Beautiful movement, and, for her, selection of the Classical Revival style for the 1940 remodel of the house likely represented a turn away from the Victorian-era styles and traditions held by her parents. Today, the precise meaning behind the architectural selection remains speculative, but the house's grand proportions and elaborate Classical Revival detailing clearly communicate ambition and association with national and regional architectural trends. Character defining elements of the Classical Revival style visible in the design of the Mitchell-Simmons House include the two-story wood-frame irregular form, wraparound porch (currently under rehabilitation), symmetrical

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<sup>92</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, Nov. 16, 1975, [www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/757307326/](http://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/757307326/).

<sup>93</sup> William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969).

<sup>94</sup> "Parade of Homes;" "George Strauch House," *SAH Archipedia*, accessed Sept. 20, 2022, [sah-archipedia.org/buildings/TX-01-RF13](http://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/TX-01-RF13).

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façade, hipped with cross-gabled roof, and the full-height entry porch with its triangular pediment supported by monumental Corinthian columns.<sup>95</sup>

Architect Jules Leffland

Understanding the background of architect Jules Leffland is important for understanding the evolution of architectural tastes in southeast Texas, gradually shifting from the Queen Anne to the Classical Revival style – as exemplified by the Mitchell-Simmons House. Architect Jules Leffland, who designed the original Mitchell House in 1902, emigrated to Texas from Denmark in 1886 (Figure 16). Leffland's father and grandfather both worked as architects, and his formal training included study at the Institute of Technology of Copenhagen and practice under an established Copenhagen architect for five years. His wife's family operated a resort hotel in Horsholm on the Baltic Sea, which allowed Leffland to encounter a diverse array of prominent friends and potential clients. One friend, Viggo Koehler, immigrated to Texas and encouraged Jules Leffland to join him, which he did in 1886.<sup>96</sup> Leffland immigrated via the port at Indianola, recently devastated by a hurricane. He quickly found abundant work relocating surviving houses from Indianola inland to Cuero.<sup>97</sup> Shortly thereafter, Leffland settled in Victoria, where he briefly partnered with established local architect James Hull before opening his own practice. Victoria was booming at the time with an influx of rail-related commerce, leading to high demand for new construction. Leffland's European training familiarized him with a wide array of high-style architecture, which appealed to the region's newly wealthy ranchers and merchants. From around 1890 to 1905, Leffland primarily designed in Victorian-era styles – especially the Queen Anne style, which he used for the Mitchell House as well as dozens of other examples nearby.<sup>98</sup> Notable surviving examples of Leffland's Queen Anne designs include the 1892 Burrough-Daniels house in Victoria, the ca. 1900 Clegg House in Victoria, and the 1900-1907 Woodworth House at 209 E. Purisima Street in Refugio (built by a cousin of John M. O'Brien, Sr.).<sup>99</sup> Throughout his career, Leffland embraced classically inspired architectural detailing, and he even integrated classical details into a number of designs with Queen Anne building forms. Two notable examples of this merger of classical architectural details with the Queen Anne style are Leffland's own ca. 1900 house in Victoria (Figure 17) as well as the 1896 John M. O'Brien, Jr. House in Refugio (Figure 13).<sup>100</sup> These hybrid designs would serve as a template for the 1940 remodel of the Mitchell-Simmons House. Leffland continued to practice architecture in Victoria until his death in 1924, and his son Kai Leffland continued to run the firm after his death.<sup>101</sup>

Builder George Strauch (1861–1940)

George Strauch founded the Strauch Lumber Company in Refugio around 1888—well before the arrival of the railroad—and the company continued to operate until 1976. George Strauch was a first-generation Swiss-German American, raised near Salt Creek in Refugio County (Figure 18).<sup>102</sup> The Strauch Lumber Company was one of the

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<sup>95</sup> Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture*, (New York: Alfred Knop, 2014), 433-446.

<sup>96</sup> Anne Alcorn, "Leffland, Jules Carl," Handbook of Texas Online, accessed May 08, 2022, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/leffland-jules-carl](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/leffland-jules-carl).

<sup>97</sup> HHM, "The Historic Resources of Victoria," 8-14; Alcorn, "Leffland, Jules Carl."

<sup>98</sup> HHM, "The Historic Resources of Victoria," 8-14; Alcorn, "Leffland, Jules Carl." As Alcorn states, "By 1910, from an office in Victoria, Leffland had designed and supervised the construction of at least eighty structures."

<sup>99</sup> HHM, "Burrough-Daniels House," NRHP Nomination Form, Austin, THC, 1986, from the THC Atlas, [atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/2086002604](http://atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/2086002604); HHM, "John H. Clegg House," NRHP Nomination Form, Austin, THC, 1986, from the THC Atlas, [atlas.thc.texas.gov/NR/pdfs/86002548/86002548.pdf](http://atlas.thc.texas.gov/NR/pdfs/86002548/86002548.pdf); "Woodworth House (Atlas Number 5391005903)," Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (RHTL), 1976, from the THC Atlas, [atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/5391005903](http://atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details/5391005903).

<sup>100</sup> HHM, "Leffland, Jules, House," NRHP Nomination Form, Austin, THC, 1991, from the THC Atlas, [atlas.thc.texas.gov/NR/pdfs/91000577/91000577.pdf](http://atlas.thc.texas.gov/NR/pdfs/91000577/91000577.pdf); *Pictorial History*.

<sup>101</sup> HHM, "The Historic Resources of Victoria," 8-14.

<sup>102</sup> *Sketches of Refugio*.

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first lumber companies to open in the region – even nearby Victoria lacked a local lumber dealer until the Sibley & Gilbert Planing Mill, Sash, Door & Cotton Gin Company opened in 1888. Beforehand most lumber had to be shipped by barge from the Southeastern U.S. via New Orleans.<sup>103</sup> Sanborn maps show the “George Strauch Lumber Yard” complex located at the southeast corner of Commerce Street and Plasuella Street (present-day 601-605 Commerce Street).<sup>104</sup> The complex included several sheds and warehouse buildings. Some of the warehouse buildings from the lumber yard appear to have been reused today as the headquarters of the Refugio Police Department and the Police Annex, based on analysis of aerial photos and Sanborn maps. Strauch quickly became successful. Over the years, Refugio newspapers reported use of materials from the Strauch Lumber Company for prominent construction projects in Refugio. Strauch’s own home was built in 1911 at 103 E. Plausela Street in a simple Prairie style put the quality of lumber of full display (Figure 19).<sup>105</sup> Newspaper publications of City expenditures also showed routine allocations to the company for “paint, lumber, etc.” to maintain public buildings.<sup>106</sup> It is likely that the Strauch Lumber Company supplied the lumber for both the 1902-1903 construction of the Mitchell House and the 1940 remodel of the Mitchell-Simmons House, given the lack of other suppliers in Refugio at the time. In addition to providing building supplies, the company also played an active role in Refugio’s civic life, setting up tents for revivals and travelling performers in the lumber yard’s open space and supplying the Christmas Tree for the American Legion.<sup>107</sup>

Architect Irving Dunbar (1887–1969)

Irving Dunbar was born in Ashby, Texas, in Matagorda County in 1887 (Figure 20). In his young adulthood, he worked as a carpenter and farmer in Matagorda County.<sup>108</sup> Dunbar served in the U.S. Navy in both World War I and World War II.<sup>109</sup> Between the wars, around 1920, he worked in McAllen as a carpenter and foreman at a lumber yard.<sup>110</sup> He appears to have gained his architectural training in the 1920s or 1930s, perhaps as part of his military service. One of Dunbar’s first projects in Refugio was the design of the 1936 City Hall.<sup>111</sup> By 1940, census records document Irving Dunbar working as an architect and living in Refugio with his wife Jessie and daughter Laverne, who worked as a bookkeeper for a lumber yard.<sup>112</sup> Starting in 1940, Refugio newspapers record Dunbar’s deep involvement in the construction boom resulting from oil development nearby. The 1940 remodeling project for the Mitchell-Simmons House was frequently mentioned in the newspaper and likely helped publicize his work and boost his career.<sup>113</sup> His design for the Mitchell-Simmons House remodel used a Classical Revival style showing the influence of Jules Leffland’s work. Other prominent local projects designed by Irving Dunbar in 1940 include the high school gymnasium, the V.V. Bailey House, the American Legion building, the Refugio County Hospital, Refugio City Hall.<sup>114</sup> Newspaper notices of his work in Refugio slowed after around 1944, although advertisements for the firm continued through 1951. He died in 1969.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> HHM, “The Historic Resources of Victoria,” 7-7.

<sup>104</sup> *Refugio, Texas* [Map], Sanborn, 1935, sheet 2, from UT, [maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/p-r/txu-sanborn-refugio-1935-2.jpg](https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/p-r/txu-sanborn-refugio-1935-2.jpg).

<sup>105</sup> [Strauch House, photograph], n.d., from the Portal crediting the THC [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph669016/m1/1/](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph669016/m1/1/); “George Strauch House,” SAH Archipedia, accessed Sept. 21, 2022, [sah-archipedia.org/buildings/TX-01-RF13](https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/TX-01-RF13).

<sup>106</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Mar. 13, 1931, p. 6, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1161215/m1/6](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1161215/m1/6).

<sup>107</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Dec. 25, 1931, p. 1, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1158515/m1/1/](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1158515/m1/1/),

<sup>108</sup> Census 1910, Matagorda County, Justice Precinct 7, District 0145, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/123056273:7884](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/123056273:7884); World War I Draft Card, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/16772895:6482](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/16772895:6482).

<sup>109</sup> Various military records, Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/search/categories/39/?name=irving\\_dunbar&birth=1887\\_matagorda-texas-usa](https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/39/?name=irving_dunbar&birth=1887_matagorda-texas-usa).

<sup>110</sup> Census, 1920, Hidalgo County, McAllen, District 0078, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/100282602:6061](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/100282602:6061).  
<sup>111</sup> “Refugio City Hall.”

<sup>112</sup> Census, 1940, Refugio Enumeration District 196-1, from Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157857927:2442](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157857927:2442).

<sup>113</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Feb. 23, 1948, p. 1. Additional research would be required to determine if these buildings are extant.

<sup>114</sup> *Refugio Timely Remarks*, various articles from 1940, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874854/m1/1/](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874854/m1/1/), [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874648/m1/8/](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874648/m1/8/), [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874375/m1/1/](https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874375/m1/1/).

<sup>115</sup> “Irving Harold Dunbar,” Find a Grave Index, accessed Oct. 18, 2022, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/101262522/irving-h-dunbar>.

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## **Conclusion**

The Mitchell-Simmons House, originally built in 1902-1903 in the Queen Anne style, was transformed into a Classical Revival style residence in 1940. The property is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance as an outstanding local example of Classical Revival residential architecture. The period of significance is 1940 when the house was remodeled.

Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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**Additional Documentation**

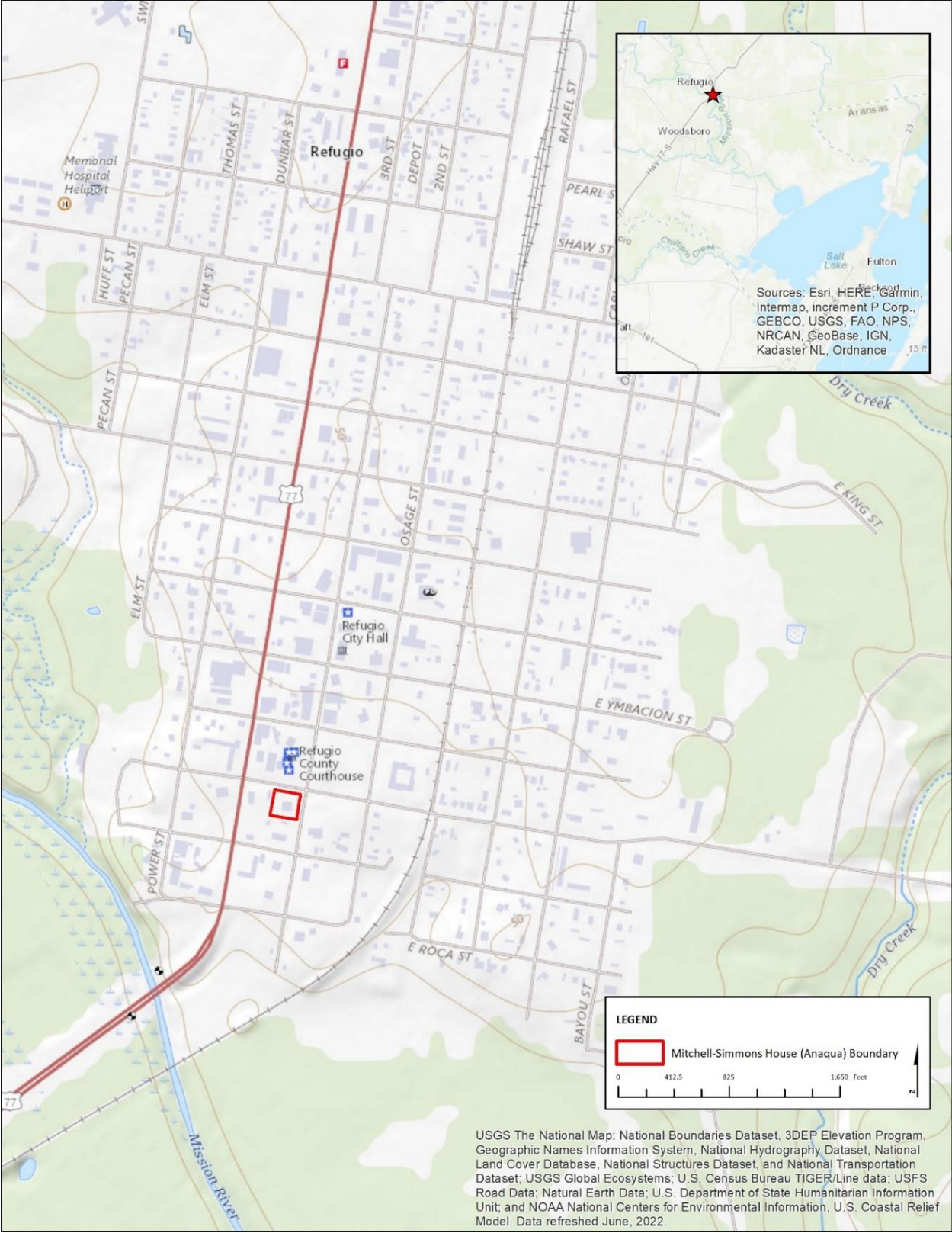
**Maps**

Map 1. Refugio County, Texas



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

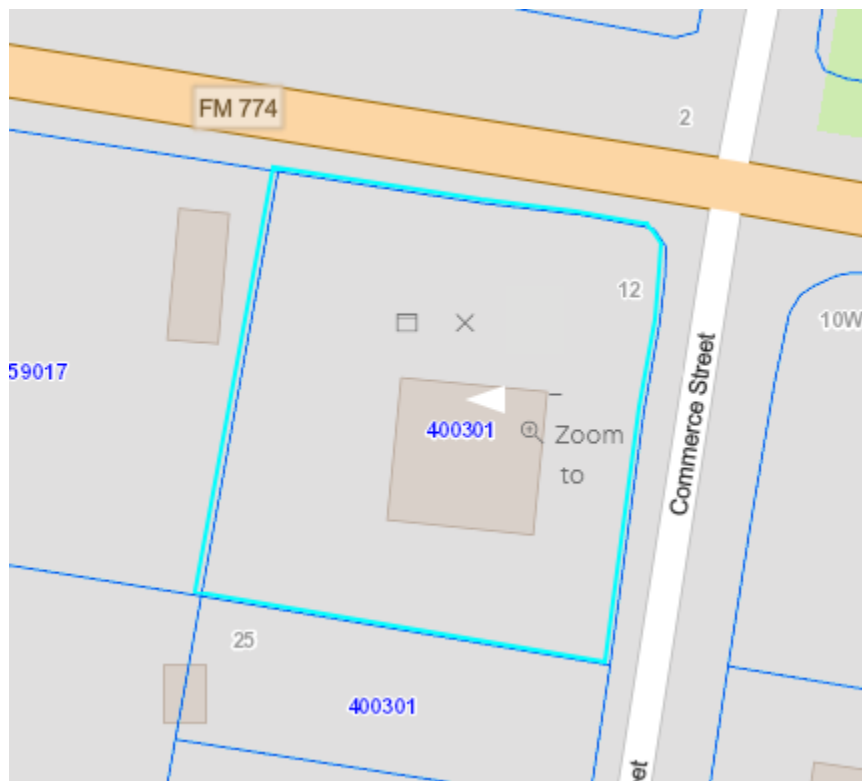
Map 2. Current map of Refugio showing the boundary for the Mitchell-Simmons (Anaqua) House.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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Map 3. N/3 OF LT 3 & LT 12 BLK 25 (Parcel ID: 400301), Refugio, Refugio County, Texas. Refugio County Appraisal District data accessed January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The boundary follows the legal parcel and contains the area historically associated with the Mitchell-Simmons House property. It excludes the smaller 0.2128 acre parcel to the south, listed under the same parcel ID (as sequence 2) and ownership in the Refugio County Appraisal District data.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

Map 4. Google Earth map, accessed January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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## Figures

Figure 1. Photo of the Whelan House, facing southwest, no date. Source: Sketches of Refugio.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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Figure 2. Photo of the Whelan House, facing west, no date. Source: Courtesy of Bart Wales, current property owner.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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Figure 3. Photo of the Mitchell House, facing northwest, c. 1910. Source: Courtesy of Bart Wales, current property owner.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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Figure 4. Photo of the Mitchell-Simmons House, facing southwest, likely dating from the 1970s (prior to 1980 since brick walkway not yet present). Source: Portal crediting the THC, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph669110>.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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Figure 5. Photo of the Mitchell-Simmons House, facing south-southwest, likely from the 1970s. Source: *Portal to Texas History*, crediting the THC, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth670857>.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

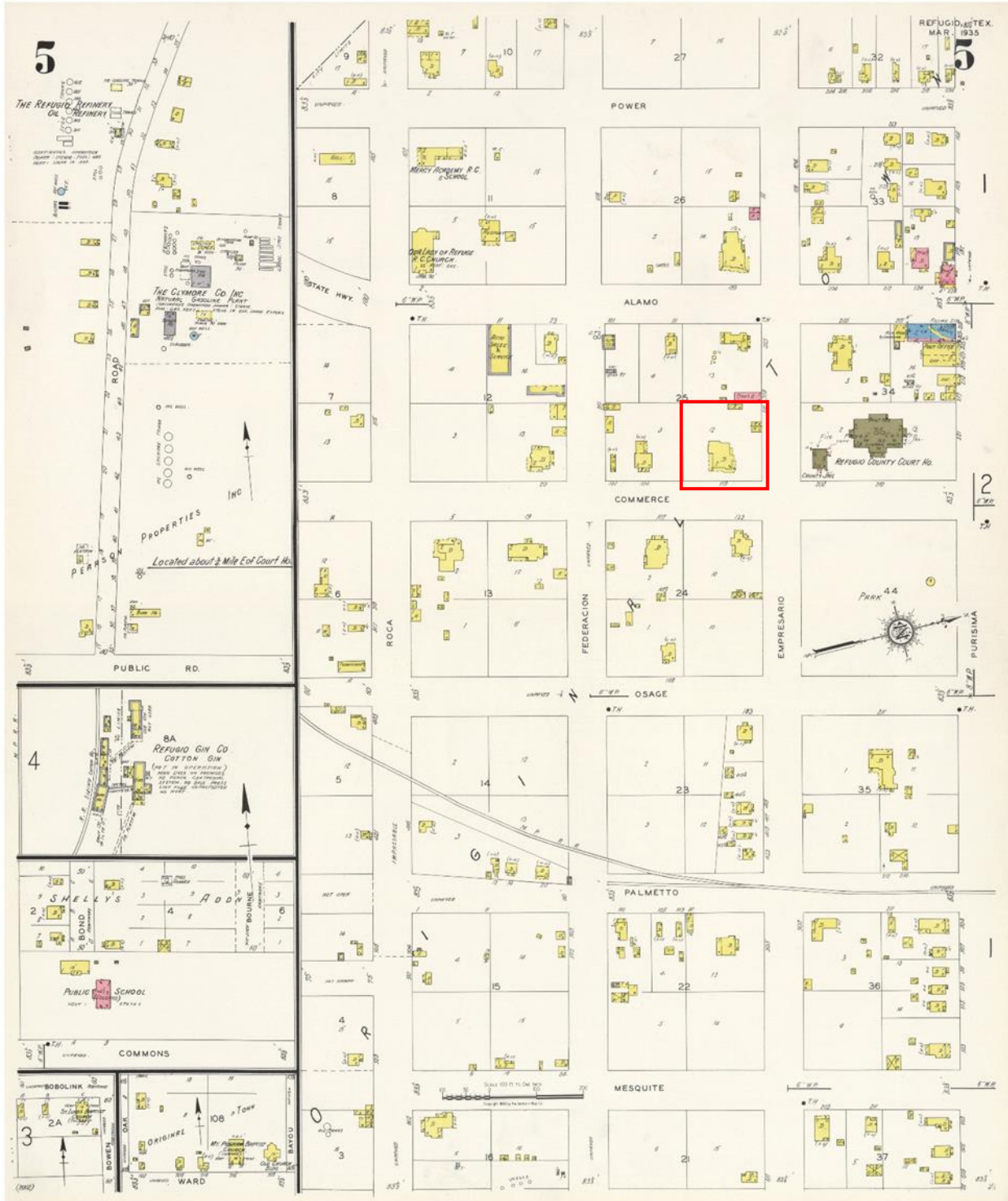
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Figure 6. Photo of the Mitchell House, facing west, no date. Source: Courtesy of Bart Wales, current property owner.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

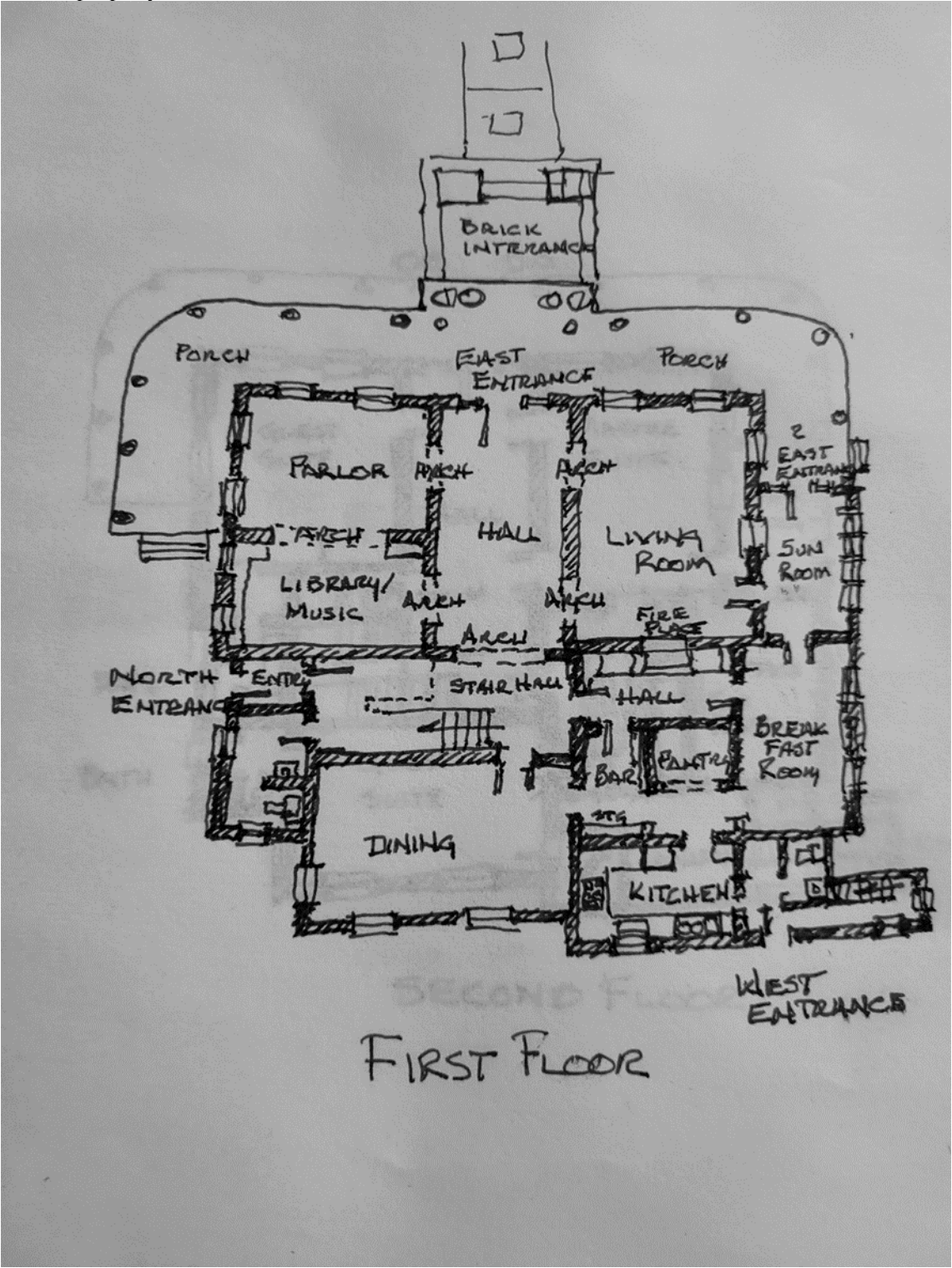
Figure 7. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Refugio, 1935, Sheet 1. Note the Mitchell House at the southwest corner of the intersection of Commerce Street and Empesario Street outlined in red. Source: UT, <https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/p-r/txu-sanborn-refugio-1935-5.jpg>.



Original located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin

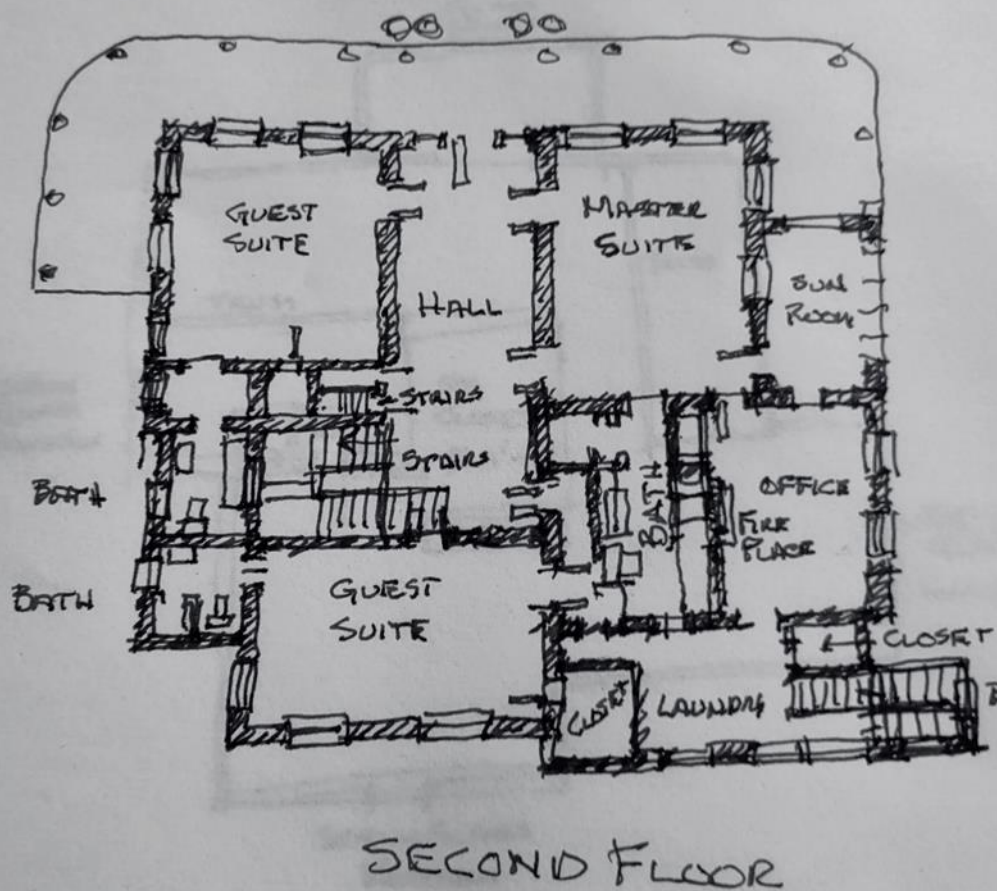
Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

Figure 8. Sketch plan of the first floor of the Mitchell-Simmons House, 2022. Source: Courtesy of Bart Wales, current property owner.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

Figure 9. Sketch plan of the second floor of the Mitchell-Simmons House, 2022. Source: Courtesy of Bart Wales, current property owner.



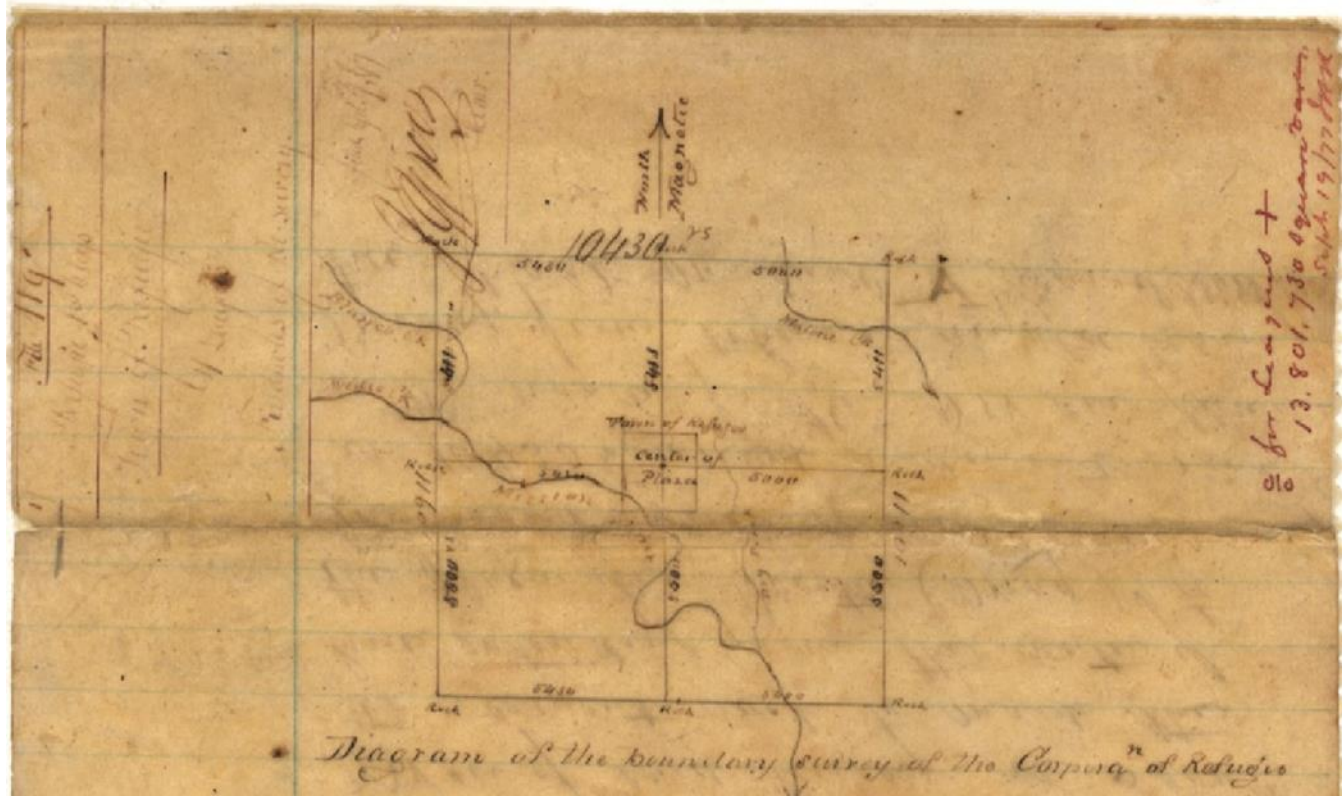
Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

Figure 10. Newspaper reproduction of a photo of the Mitchell-Simmons house in 1940. Source: *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Oct. 25, 1940, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph874909/m1/1/>.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

Figure 11. Map of the original Refugio townsite, granted from the State of Texas to the Town of Refugio in 1876. Source: *Texas GLO*, Refugio County Abstract 345 (later Abstract 56), [https://s3.glo.texas.gov/ncu/SCANDOCS/archives\\_webfiles/arcmaps/webfiles/landgrants/PDFs/3/3/4/334212.pdf](https://s3.glo.texas.gov/ncu/SCANDOCS/archives_webfiles/arcmaps/webfiles/landgrants/PDFs/3/3/4/334212.pdf).



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

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Figure 12. Photos of Mary Agnes (“Maddie”) Mitchell (right) and a grouping of Oscar Mitchell, Josephine Mitchell, and John Mitchell (left), no date. Source: *Sketches of Refugio*.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

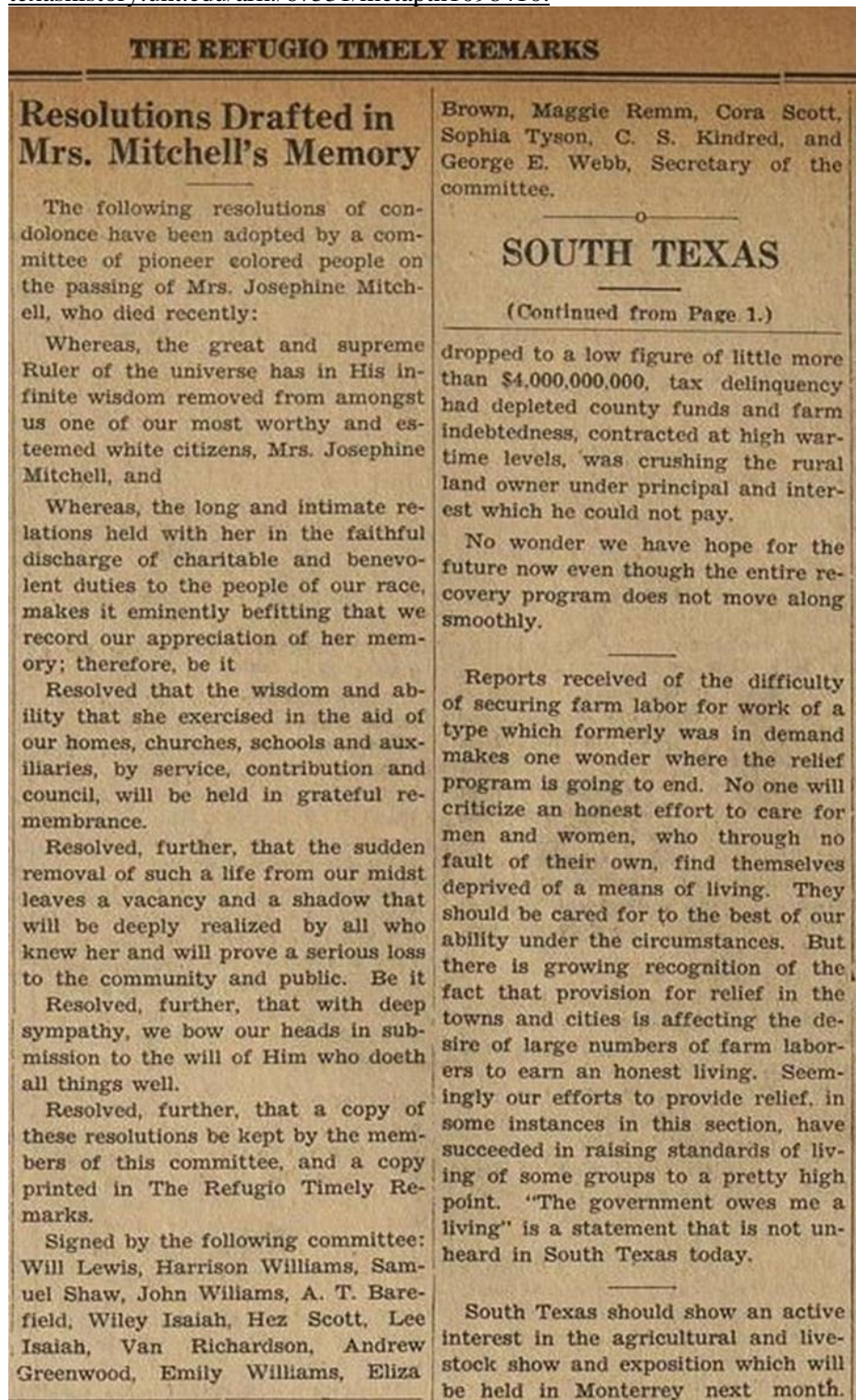
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Figure 13. Photo of the John M. O'Brien House, designed by Jules Leffland and constructed in 1896. Source: *Pictorial History*.



Mitchell-Simmons House, Refugio, Refugio County, Texas

Figure 14. Newspaper reproduction of the "Resolutions Drafted in Mrs. [Josephine] Mitchell's Memory," by "a committee of pioneer colored people," 1934. Source: *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Sept. 28, 1934, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098410](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1098410).



# Simmons antique collection will be auctioned

By BEN GOODWIN  
Staff Writer

An auctioneer's gavel will end a chapter of South Texas history here this week when the antique collection of the late William W. Simmons is sold.

Mrs. Simmons was a member of a pioneer Refugio family. She died in 1963 and the collection has remained intact in the family home since then.

The auction will cover five days, starting next Friday and finishing the following Tuesday at Moore and Moore Auctioneers, 1981 Semple. Clay Moore said the collection is one of the best ever exhibited in Texas. He said such collections are usually sold in New York City.

Mrs. Simmons was a great granddaughter of Michael Wittich, one of the original Irish immigrants who made their way to South Texas and formed the Refugio Colony in the days of the Republic. Wittich's home, which stood at the corner of Commerce and Empresario Streets, was the first frame house built in Refugio. Her parents, Oscar "Doc" Wittich and Josephine O'Brien, built a Victorian-style home on the site.

Mrs. Simmons married William Joseph Simmons, a Texas oil man, in 1909. They resided at his home in industrial style. The huge residence is now for sale. Mrs. Simmons retained some of the furnishings of the original Victorian home as well as some that belonged to her mother. These are included in this week's auction.

An avid student of Texas history and genealogy, Mrs. Simmons was author of "The Flag of Texas Independence" and an unpublished manuscript, "Reminiscences of the Mustangs and Indians of the Coastal Region of Texas." Mrs. Simmons was a member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Texas Landmark Association and the State Centennial Commission.

The estate's collection that will be auctioned includes old Paria urns, 13 chandeliers, including Baccarat, Louis 15 and Louis 16 gold leaf French. Marble and bronze furnishings.

There are also credenzas, port mirrors, pedestal mirrors, brass cabinets, porcelain and Meissen compotes. The collection has several paintings, one dated as early as 1812. There is some evidence some are older.

A piano that reportedly came from Kingman, Spain, which a Spanish pianist will also be auctioned.

The auction will start at 7 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and 1 p.m. Monday and Tuesday. There will be a \$10 admission per person which will cover the first three days. A refund will be given if the ticket holder buys more than 100 worth of merchandise at the auction.

**French figurine**

Mrs. Irene Moore with one of many compotes in Simmons collection

Group of early French figurines

## 'Seniors' enjoying college life at De Mar campuses

By MARY ALICE BUSH  
Staff Writer

Isela Olsen is a great teacher who likes to make lessons for her students.

"They're smart good students but she thought she could do better. So when she found that she could take part of class at De Mar College without leaving the campus."

Now, for at least one semester, she's giving the younger students in her architectural drawing and sketching class a new twist.

Mrs. Olsen is one of 40 persons, aged 18 to 80, who have signed up for classes under the new senior citizens program at De Mar. The program provides tuition and most of the cost for college courses which has some available without paying tuition.

The new seniors on campus include a woman who drives in three kilometers to take a biology course, Mrs. Olsen, who is taking writing at De Mar, and a woman who is taking computer. "I don't know how to use a typewriter," she said.

There are students of French, physics, Spanish, psychology, social accounting, and typing, and a traditional type taking art, computer, and French.

"I guess the one who has attended the campus since 1951 is Mrs. Winkelman," said program Coordinator Jack Lusk.

Mrs. Olsen said she was the first to enroll in the program. She said she was the first to enroll in the program. She said she was the first to enroll in the program.

"Some are quite new where to start," said Mrs. Olsen. "I go with my husband, however, he's not a student. Some feel a little apprehensive about going back to the classroom after a long absence. One woman, who wanted to improve her office skills, told me, 'I don't know if I can still learn.'"

The thing she is enjoying.

The senior citizens program is located in Room 100 of the building housing the De Mar campus. It is open to all citizens and is open to all citizens.

Students may take academic, vocational, technical, and social sciences and special services. They may also take courses at other colleges. A few companies, during the day or at the evening. The only exception is the De Mar campus.

"Seniors are admitted free in any class they wish to take. There may be some materials fees in some of the courses but they haven't been charged any fees," Mrs. Lusk said.

"Deceptive driving has been very popular and there will continue to be classes available for senior citizens," Mrs. Lusk said. These including the computer program for 10 percent discount on other classes.

Mrs. Lusk said that the program is open to all citizens and is open to all citizens.

The purpose of the program is to "afford the importance of ongoing learning and new life experiences for older adults," Mrs. Lusk said. Mrs. Lusk said that the program is open to all citizens and is open to all citizens.

Isela Olsen (r) with classmate Kitty Hancock (Photo by George Gonsors)

## Disputed cargo to remain in Gulf

The tanker *Dwight D. Eisenhower* and its 12.5 million barrels of oil, which was seized by the U.S. Coast Guard, will remain in the Gulf of Mexico until the U.S. Coast Guard can determine the ship's status.

The ship was seized by the U.S. Coast Guard on Oct. 10, 1979, after it was found to be carrying oil from Iran to the U.S. The ship was seized by the U.S. Coast Guard on Oct. 10, 1979, after it was found to be carrying oil from Iran to the U.S.

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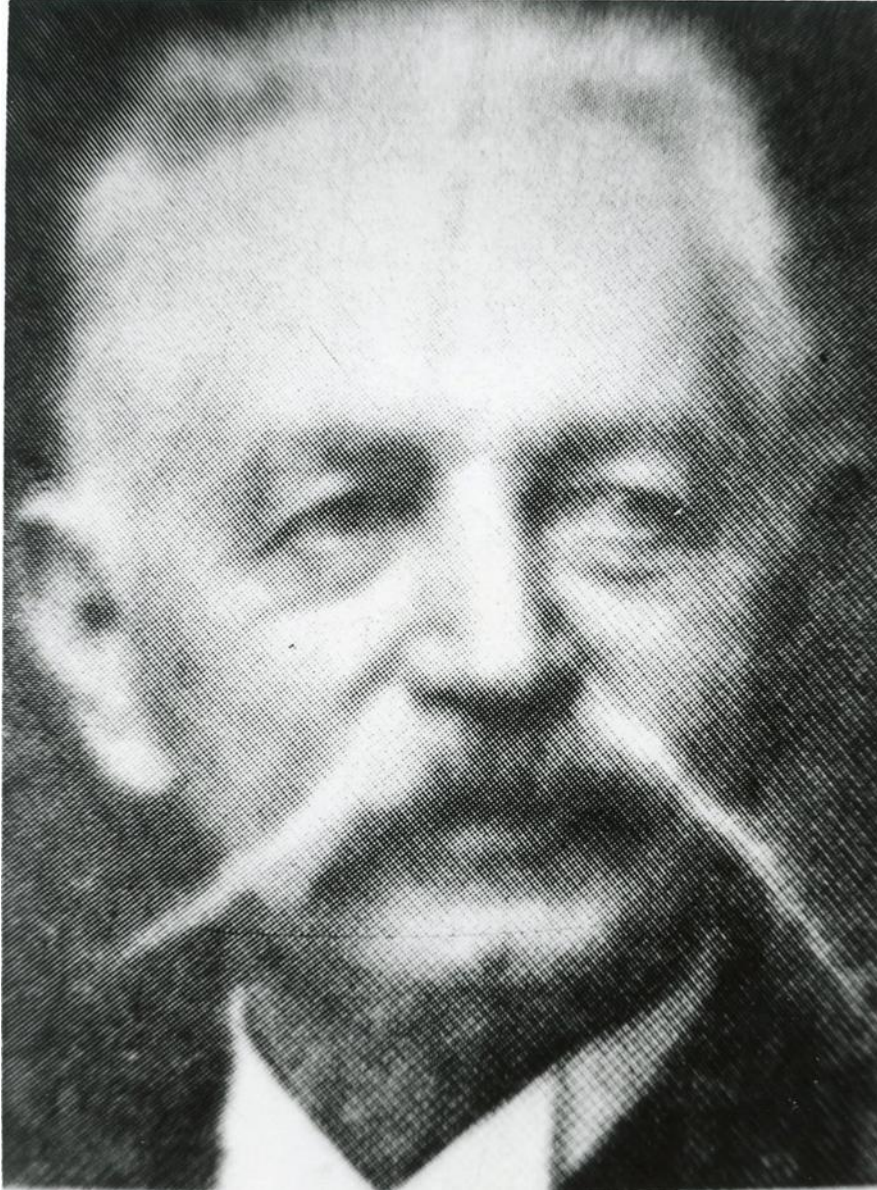
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Figure 16. Portrait of architect Jules Leffland, no date. Source: "Jules Leffland Architectural Drawings," <https://vrhc.uhv.edu/manuscripts/leffland.aspx>.



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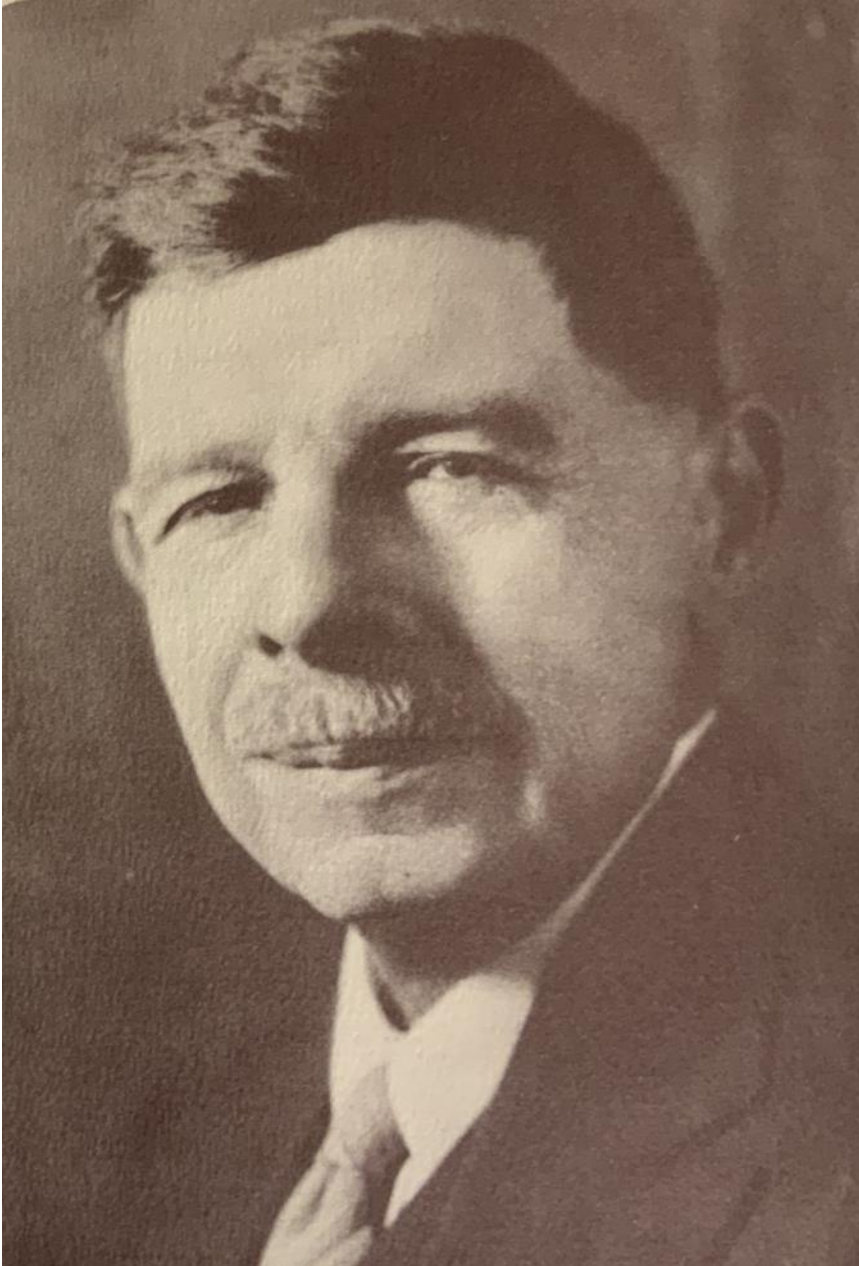
Figure 17. Photo of the Jules Leffland House in Victoria, Texas, facing northeast, 1990. Source: HHM, "Jules Leffland House."



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Figure 18. Portrait of builder George Strauch, no date. Source: *Sketches of Refugio*.



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Figure 19. Strauch House, photograph, no date. Source: *Portal to Texas History* crediting the THC, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph669016/m1/1/>.



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Figure 20. Portrait of architect Irving Dunbar around 1941. Source: *Refugio Timely Remarks*, Jan. 2, 1941, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph879859/m1/3>.



I. H. Dunbar was architect on numerous Refugio buildings.

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Figure 21: January 2021 (pre-rehab) photo showing east front façade, porch detail, camera facing northwest.



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Figure 22: January 2021 (pre-rehab) photo showing east front façade (left) and north side façade (right), garage visible in background at right, camera facing southwest.



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**Photos**

Photo 1. East front façade (left) and north side façade (right), camera facing southwest. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 2. North side façade, camera facing south. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 3. North side facade (left) and west side facade (right), camera facing southeast. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 4. West side facade, camera facing east. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 5. West rear facade (left) and south side façade (right), camera facing northeast. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 6. South side façade showing front porch, camera facing north. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 7. East front façade, camera facing west. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 8. East front façade, camera facing southwest. Photographed by Breeden Restoration and Preservation, December 2023.



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Photo 9. Interior, first floor, living room, camera facing west, doors to the sunroom shown at south (left) and stairs shown in northwest background (right). Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.



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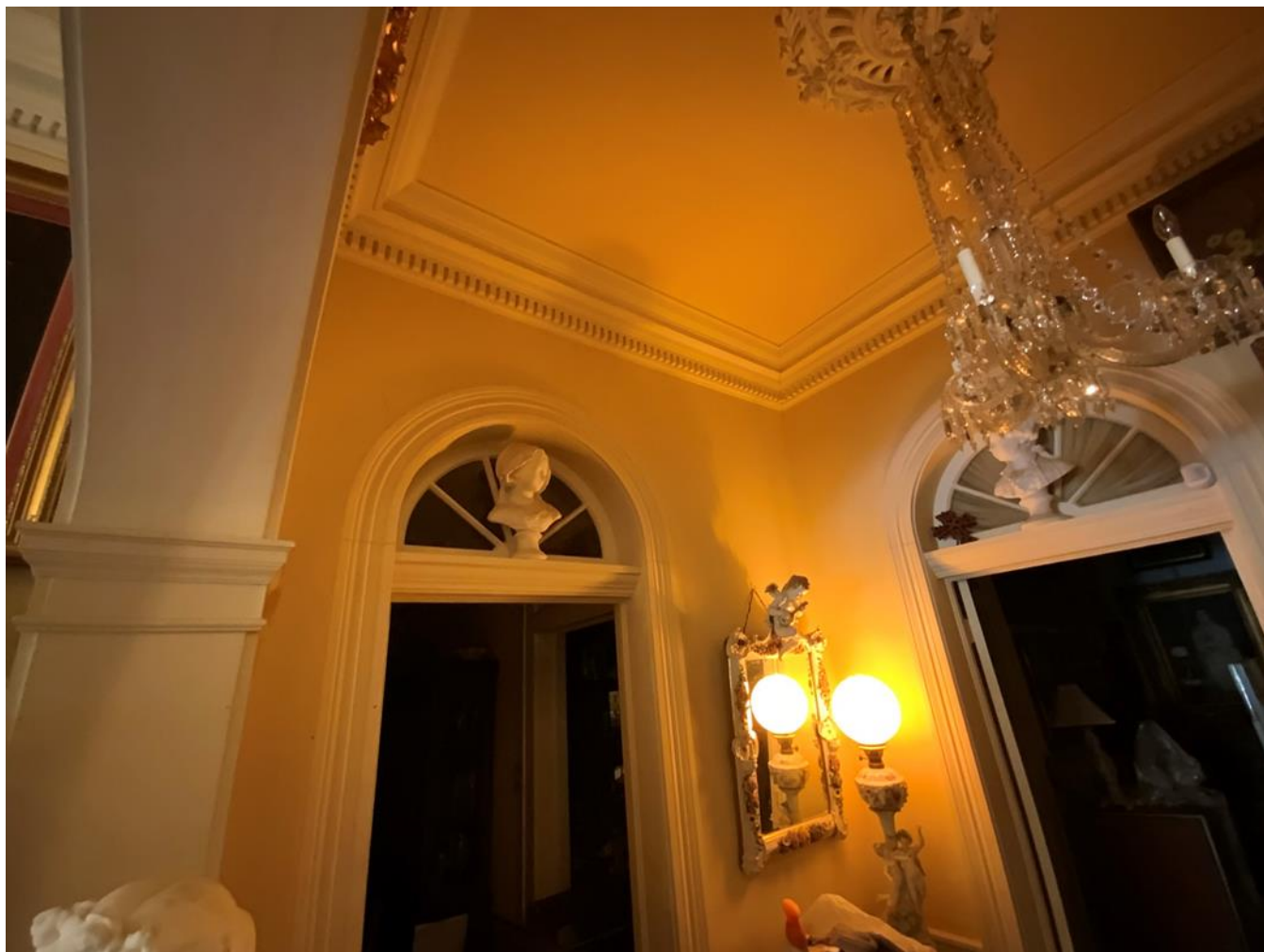
Photo 10. Interior, first floor, parlor in foreground and library/music room in background, camera facing west by southwest. Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.



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Photo 11. Interior, first floor, stair hall, camera facing southwest. Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.



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Photo 12. Garage, north front façade, camera facing south. Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.



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Photo 13. Brick front walkway, camera facing west. Shutters removed during current rehabilitation. Photographed by Erin Tyson, August 11, 2022.

